

VARIETY



THE GRAMMY
I S S U E

SONIC SINSATION

H O W
PHOEBE BRIDGERS
BECAME A BONA FIDE
ROCK STAR IN
QUARANTINE TIMES

B Y
JEM ASWAD

P. **28 - 46**

P. 28

Rising Star

In lockdown, livestreams and social media have propelled Phoebe Bridgers' career into the stratosphere

By Jem Aswad

P. 40

Back to Business

Despite the pandemic, the recording industry saw some growth in 2020. Now acts are ready to go on the road again

By Jem Aswad, Cata Balzano, Geoff Mayfield, Ellise Shafer, Chris Willman

P. 46

Spiritual Resonance

Triple Grammy nominee Jhené Aiko used crystal "singing" bowls to create the unique sound of her album "Chilombo"

By Ellise Shafer



Styling: Maryam Malakpour/The Only Agency; Makeup: Nicole Maguire using Charlotte Tilbury; Clothing: Gucci by Alessandro Michele

Cover photograph by Janell Shirtcliff

Phoebe Bridgers is up for four Grammys.

The Biggest Stories of the Week From Our Reporters

Compiled by Joe Otterson



1

Bruce Willis, Luke Wilson, Devon Sawa Team in Action Thriller

Bruce Willis, Luke Wilson and Devon Sawa are set to star in action thriller "Gasoline Alley." Highland Film Group, which is handling international rights, is presenting the project to buyers at this week's European Film Market. "Cosmic Sin" helmer Edward Drake, who reunites with Willis for the film, directs from a script by Tom Sierchio ("The Girl Who Invented Kissing"). Production will begin in early March across the U.S. Corey Large ("Cosmic Sin," "The November Man") and Sierchio are producing the film, with BondIt Media Capital financing. Matthew Helderman, Johnny Messner, Stephen Eads, Highland Film Group's Arianne Fraser and Delphine Perrier, Jordan Yale Levine, Jordan Beckerman and Jon Keeyes are executive producers. Sawa stars as Jimmy Jayne, a tough-guy boss who becomes implicated in the triple murder of three Hollywood starlets drowned in a luxury hotel pool. — *Manori Ravindran*

Uncovered

Photographer Janell Shirtcliff describes the inspiration for her Feb. 2 shoot with cover subject Phoebe Bridgers in Los Angeles as "Technicolor meets an old film star." She adds: "I'm a huge fan of *Variety* and really appreciate the consideration

they put into each artist they choose for their issue — and I'm happy to be a fan of Phoebe's music as well." Shirtcliff is also a director; her first feature film, "Habit," was just bought by Lionsgate and will be released this year.



2

Publicity Vets Lori Burns, Emmy Chang Join Lede Co.

Veteran entertainment publicity and strategy veterans Lori Burns and Emmy Chang have joined public relations and consulting firm The Lede Co. Burns comes on board from her post as senior VP of publicity at STX Films. Chang arrives from Warner Bros. Pictures, where she served as director of global publicity and awards. Burns will join the company's content division, launched last year by Liz Biber. Chang will work in both content and strategic communications, reporting to Biber and Lede partner and co-CEO Sarah Rothman. Both Burns and Chang will work with clients to develop and execute strategic and creative PR and awards campaigns for film, television, podcasts and digital content. Chang will also help develop public profiles for the entertainment, media, tech and creative roster. — *Matt Donnelly*



3

Bill Nye to Host Peacock Science Series From Brannon Braga, Seth MacFarlane

Peacock has ordered a series hosted by noted science educator Bill Nye. Each episode of the show, titled "The End Is Nye," dives into the myths and realities

of threats both natural and unnatural, while offering a scientific blueprint for surviving, mitigating and preventing such catastrophes. Brannon Braga will serve as showrunner and executive producer in addition to directing all episodes. Nye will also executive produce in addition to hosting. Seth MacFarlane and Erica Huggins of Fuzzy Door Prods. will executive produce. Rachel Hargreaves-Heald is executive in charge of production for Fuzzy Door. The series is a co-production of Universal Television Alternative Studio and Universal Cable Prods. Fuzzy Door has an overall deal with NBCUniversal. — *Joe Otterson*



4

Evan Winiker Joins Range Media as Partner in Music Division

Evan Winiker has joined Range Media Partners as a managing partner in the music department. He arrives from Full Stop Management and brings with him clients MAX, Daya, Disco Biscuits, Skyler Stonestreet and Walk off the Earth. Joining Winiker at Range are managers Zack Phillips and Valentine Banor. Range has been swiftly growing its music division, hiring managers Michele Harrison and Melissa Ruderman in recent months. Winiker spent four years at Full Stop after five years with Brandon Creed's Creed Co., which merged with Jeffrey Azoff's shop in 2017 to form Full Stop. Prior to management, Winiker was a member of the indie rock band Steel Train, alongside Jack Antonoff. — *Shirley Halperin*

Stars of Upcoming TV Premieres



Mae Whitman
Good Girls
Vscore = 54
Her number may look frugal, but the new season may make it fine.



Dave Herman
Paradise PD
Vscore = 46
His score is steady heading into the new run of the animated comedy.



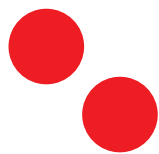
Susan Heyward
Delilah
Vscore = 46
She's hoping this legal show will help raise her bar.



Nathan Stewart-Jarrett
Generation
Vscore = 42
Can this coming-of-age dramedy reinvigorate his buzz?

'The Show Must Go On' Chronicles Theater's Battle vs. the Pandemic

By Brent Lang



Last year, after the COVID-19 pandemic shut down Broadway and the West End indefinitely, Andrew Lloyd Webber was desperate to find a way to safely reopen theaters. The composer of some of the world's most iconic musicals hit on the idea of staging two of his most popular shows, "The Phantom of the Opera" and "Cats," in South Korea, where strict testing and tracing protocols had helped the country better deal with the global health crisis. Lloyd Webber was hopeful that the productions could demonstrate to officials that with the right measures in place, live events could take place without outbreaks.

"We've got to get open again," Lloyd Webber says. "And I don't just mean Broadway or London. I mean regional theaters and nightclubs and live music."

When Sammi Cannold, a theater director and filmmaker, learned from her friend Kristen Blodgette, a music supervisor on Lloyd Webber's shows, that "Phantom" and "Cats" were about to welcome back theatergoers in South Korea, she thought she had the makings for a documentary. Cannold enlisted her mother, Dori Berinstein (the producer of "The Prom"), to serve as a co-director on the project, while getting permission from Lloyd Webber's team to embed

with the performers. Together, the pair turned Cannold's hunch into "The Show Must Go On," a tribute to those who risked it all to get back onstage.

"I felt we had to document it," says Berinstein. "It was history and it would give hope to all of us in the theater community to not give up."

Berinstein, who suffers from asthma, stayed behind to advise from New York, while Cannold took her camera to Seoul. There, she quarantined for 12 days in a nondescript hotel along with the cast, and then chronicled the extensive COVID protocols that were put in place during rehearsals and at performances. Mask wearing was strictly enforced for audience members, who also had to undergo temperature checks and be sprayed with a mist of disinfectant.

"Korea had musicals running for much of the pandemic, with theaters operating many times at full capacity," says Cannold. "And yet there were zero cases of audience-to-audience transmission."

Lloyd Webber's gambit didn't entirely pay off. Theaters are still closed in New York City, and London stages aren't expected to reopen until later this spring. However, the filmmakers believe that the Korean productions of "Phantom" and "Cats" still provide a template for when the government gives a greenlight for theaters to open their doors.

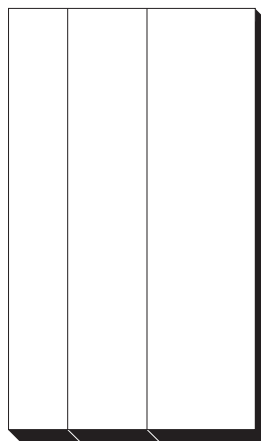
"It's not like we're going to flip a light switch and everything will be the same way it was in March 2020 before things closed down," says Berinstein. 🎧

Andrew Lloyd Webber in "The Show Must Go On"



THEATERS: SAFETY DANCE

About 34% of U.S. adults say they have "really missed" going to theaters during COVID-19 – but slightly more than that (37%) are still uneasy about going back to the movies as more cinemas reopen, according to a YouGov survey conducted last month. Americans' concern about movie-going safety is higher than among those in the U.K. (33%) or Australia (21%).
—Todd Spangler



- 20% I probably won't visit a theater unless I've been vaccinated against COVID-19.
- 27% I use streaming movie services, which means I am less likely to go to the cinema in the future than I used to.
- 37% I am worried about how safe it is to go to theaters at the moment due to COVID-19.

Source: YouGov online poll (Feb. 22) of 1,000 U.S. adults

Three Music Execs Remember the Last Concert They Saw

By Jem Aswad, Shirley Halperin and Chris Willman



TUMA BASA

Director of Black Music & Culture, YouTube

• **Show:** Baby Rose
Date: Feb. 22, 2020
Venue: Chelsea Music Hall, New York City

"A month earlier, I had seen [R&B artist] Baby Rose perform. She has a beautiful, unique voice, and I told my wife we had to see her. The show was downstairs at Chelsea Market, and YouTube is in the same building, so on the way over, I felt like I was going to work on a Saturday. She was great, and it was a totally normal night – nobody was really talking about COVID at the show – but the next concert I was planning to see, Angélique Kidjo at Carnegie Hall, was canceled."

TRACY GERSHON

President of Northern Lights Music; co-founder of Change the Conversation

• **Show:** "To Nashville With Love"
Date: March 9, 2020
Venue: Marathon Music Works, Nashville

"The tornadoes [that killed 25 people in the Nashville area] touched down six days earlier, and having a show like that come together so fast – with Brandi Carlile, Jason Isbell, Sheryl Crow, Soccer Mommy, Dan Auerbach, Ashley McBride, Yola and Brothers Osborne on the bill – reminded people of how the Nashville music community has each other's backs. Everything felt like a highlight. There were no egos; it didn't matter about the order: People rallied. It's the last time I remember hugging people. We just went from one disaster to another."

JACQUELINE SATURN

President of Virgin Music Label & Artist Services

• **Show:** Tame Impala
Date: March 10, 2020
Venue: The Forum, Inglewood, Calif.

"Clairo was opening for Tame Impala, and it was one of those shows that everyone was going to. That morning, Clairo's drummer got sick, so she and her bass player, Hayley [Briasco, who performs as Kim Tee], changed it up and played this inspiring stripped-down set. I was so proud of them, being able to pivot and make the performance work – proving how gifted they are as artists. Afterward, we all went to the floor. Tame Impala was absolutely incredible. Everyone was dancing and singing and hugging. On my way home, my ears were ringing and I just didn't care. That kind of moment in time was what inspired me to get into this business in the first place." 🎧

James Bond's Mostly Unrewarded Grammy History

By Jon Burlingame



If Billie Eilish wins this year's best movie song Grammy for "No Time to Die," it will mark only the fourth time the Recording Academy has honored a James Bond theme. Songs and scores from Bond movies have often been chart hits, and two have even won Oscars. But over 58 years and 27 films, 007 music has left Grammy voters generally unshaken and unstirred: A shocking number of now-classic themes have been completely ignored.

WINNERS

These hit the target:

- **Live and Let Die** (1973)
It didn't even go to Paul McCartney — the song's sole Grammy win went to George Martin for best arrangement accompanying vocalists. The ex-Beatle was nominated but lost in pop vocal and score categories.
- **Skyfall** (2013)
At last, a Bond theme won for song written for visual media: Adele and Paul Epworth¹ shared the prize. Doubling the rewards, Thomas Newman became the first composer of Bond music to win a score soundtrack Grammy.

NOMINATED

Close but no statue:

- **Goldfinger** (1964)
John Barry was at least nominated for original score. Number of nods for the song? Zero.
- **Casino Royale** (1967)
Burt Bacharach got three nods and Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass got a fourth, none coming up a winner.
- **The Spy Who Loved Me** (1977)
No wins out of four noms, which included song of the year for "Nobody

Does It Better" writers Marvin Hamlisch and Carole Bayer Sager and a pop vocal nomination for Carly Simon.

- **For Your Eyes Only** (1981)
Sheena Easton lost a single nom for female pop vocal.
- **Tomorrow Never Dies** (1998)
Sheryl Crow and Mitchell Froom shared a nod for motion picture song.
- **Die Another Day** (2003)
Madonna's² theme was up twice, for best dance recording and short-form music video.
- **Casino Royale** (2007)
The late Chris Cornell shared a nod for motion picture song with David Arnold ("You Know My Name").

IGNORED

Memorable songs that didn't even get a view to a nomination, much less a Grammy kill:

- **James Bond Theme*** (1962, performed by the John Barry Seven and Orchestra)
- **Goldfinger** (1964, sung by Shirley Bassey^{3*})
- **Thunderball** (1965, sung by Tom Jones)
- **The Look of Love** (1967, sung by Dusty Springfield, from "Casino Royale")
- **You Only Live Twice** (1967, sung by Nancy Sinatra)
- **Diamonds Are Forever** (1971, sung by Shirley Bassey)
- **A View to a Kill** (1985, performed by Duran Duran)
- **Goldeneye** (1995, sung by Tina Turner)
- **Writing's on the Wall** (2015, sung by Sam Smith, from "Spectre")

*In 2008, the Academy named both the "James Bond Theme" and "Goldfinger" vocal to the Grammy Hall of Fame.

VARIETY INTELLIGENCE PLATFORM

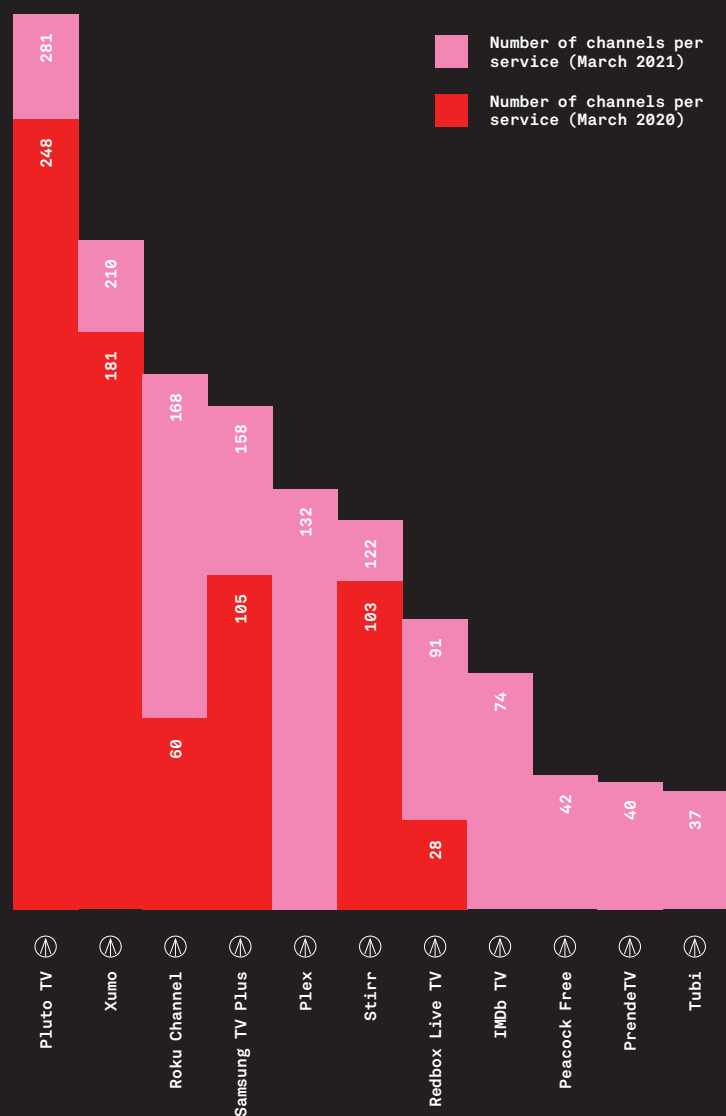
VIP+

FREE STREAMING TV OFF TO FAST START

By Gavin Bridge

Since the beginning of last year, free streaming services such as Pluto, IMDb TV, Peacock Free and Tubi have been entering the market and/or increasing by scale. Univision's PrendeTV is the 11th major free streamer to offer viewers a TV-esque experience online. Known as FAST (free ad-supported streaming TV), these services are growing more popular, with ViacomCBS' Pluto alone reporting more than 30 million monthly users domestically. With a total of 775 unique channels — such as Paramount Movie Channel, "The Walking Dead" Universe Experience and NBC News Now — across the FAST operators, there's effectively no limit to consumer choice. VIP anticipates close to 1,000 unique channels available by the end of 2021 as FAST continues to boom.

For more data from VIP+, visit variety.com/vip.



Source: Variety Intelligence Platform Analysis



Finger-Lickin' Goop



By Matt Donnelly

Gwyneth Paltrow is literally catering to her power base. The Oscar winner-turned-lifestyle CEO is launching a healthy home meal delivery service through her company, Goop. Prepared by former Per Se chef **Kim Floresca**, the plans are gluten free and follow the principles of clean eating that the global brand was built on. (Famed for its annual detox plans, Goop insists that in its kitchen, “clean does not mean restrictive.”) Grain bowls, wraps, handheld snacks, seasonal soups, salads and

a few desserts are curated for the weekly menu. Naturally, there will be options for plant-based or vegetarian meals, and sustainably sourced meat, seafood and dairy. Sauces and marinades will not contain refined sugar, soy or preservatives. “Not only are Goop Kitchen meals healthy; they are also delicious — something we are so proud of,” Floresca tells *Variety*. Service will start in the L.A. area in Venice, Pacific Palisades, Brentwood and Beverly Hills this week, with expansions to come. goopkitchen.com



← Teriyaki bowl (\$14.50) from Goop Kitchen

French Connection



At 83, **David Hockney** — one of the world’s most influential living artists — is thriving during lockdown. “David Hockney: My Normandy,” the British-born painter’s new solo show at L.A. Louver (and his 22nd at the Venice gallery since 1978), is his ode to the changing seasons of the French countryside.

Drawn to Normandy for its pastoral landscapes and rich history, Hockney — who has been capturing the life and style of Southern California since putting

down roots in the area in the 1960s — settled into a 17th-century cottage with an adjoining barn-turned-studio in March 2019. What started as a goal to depict the arrival of spring evolved into 16 vibrant works, both ink-drawn pieces and iPad prints, that invite the viewer into his existence, complete with views of the property and the fruit trees that dot the grounds. Echoing the storytelling format of the 11th-century Bayeux Tapestry that narrates the story of the Norman conquest of England, two 40-foot-long friezes show Hockney’s home and its surroundings throughout the passing seasons. Through May 1. lalouver.com — *Lesley McKenzie*

← “Spilt Ink” (2019), by David Hockney

MUST ATTEND: GRAMMYS WEEK

March 10

- The Recording Academy’s new Black Music Collective celebrates Black creators and professionals with Universal Music Group’s Jeff Harleston, John Legend, Tamika D. Mallory, Janelle Monáe, Issa Rae, Yolanda Adams, H.E.R., PJ Morton, Jimmy Jam, Quincy Jones, Debra Lee, academy chair and interim president-CEO Harvey Mason Jr. and BMC chair Riggs Morales of Atlantic Records. grammy.com

March 11

- Tayla Parx, who has worked with Ariana Grande, Janelle Monáe and Anderson.Paak, discusses her collaborations and solo career during Grammy U Masterclass. grammy.com
- The 20th anniversary celebration of the academy’s Producers & Engineers Wing includes a highlight of the group’s work along with a look at the future. grammy.com

March 12

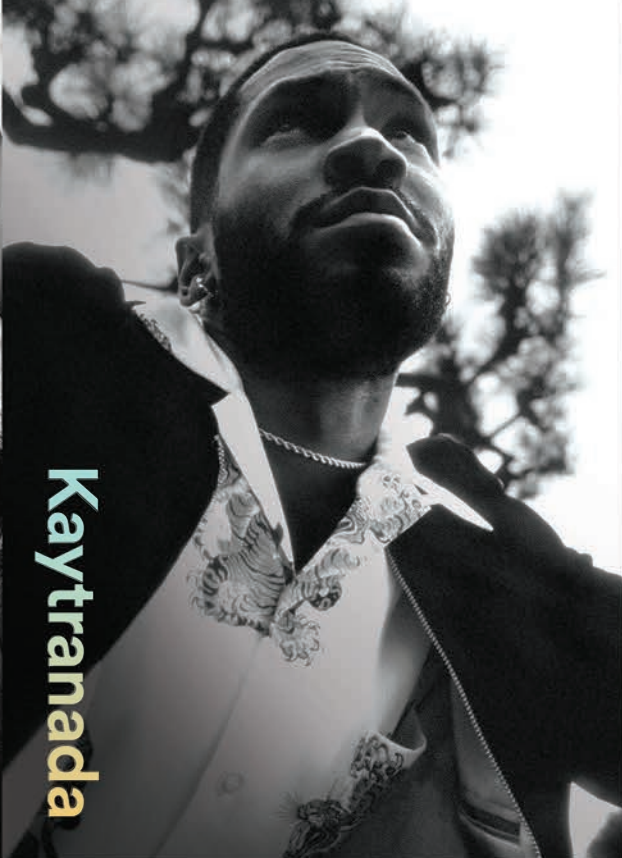
- BTS performs at MusiCares’ Music on a Mission. The lineup also features H.E.R., John Legend, Haim and Jhené Aiko. Footage of performers at past MusiCares concerts — Bruce Springsteen, Usher, Stevie Nicks and the late Tom Petty among them — is included. musicares.org
- The 23rd annual Entertainment Law Initiative event honors the Black Entertainment and Sports Lawyers Assn. Sophia Sofferman, the winner of this year’s Entertainment Law Initiative Writing Competition, along with runners-up Evan Biegel and Alberto Vargas, will also be recognized. grammy.com

Janelle Monáe





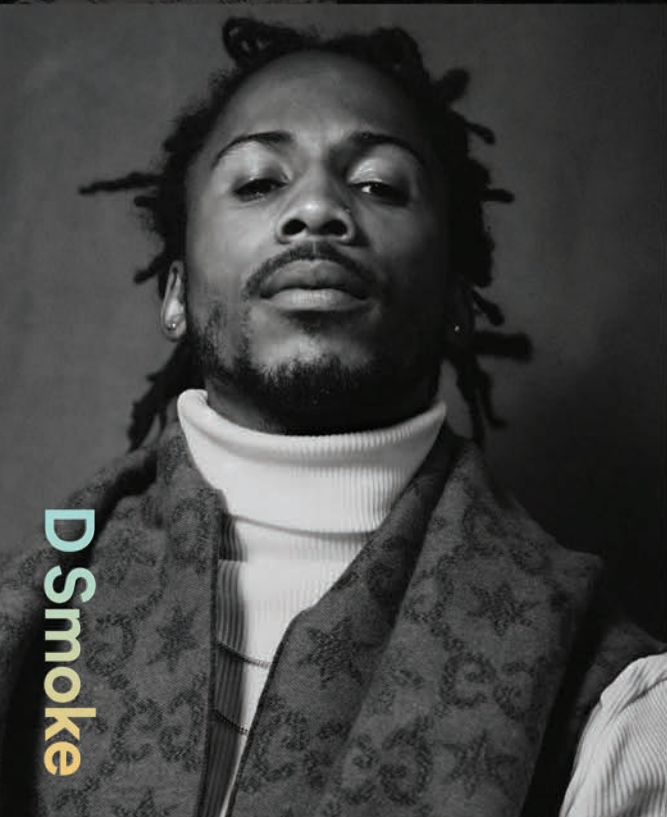
Megan Thee Stallion



Kaytranada

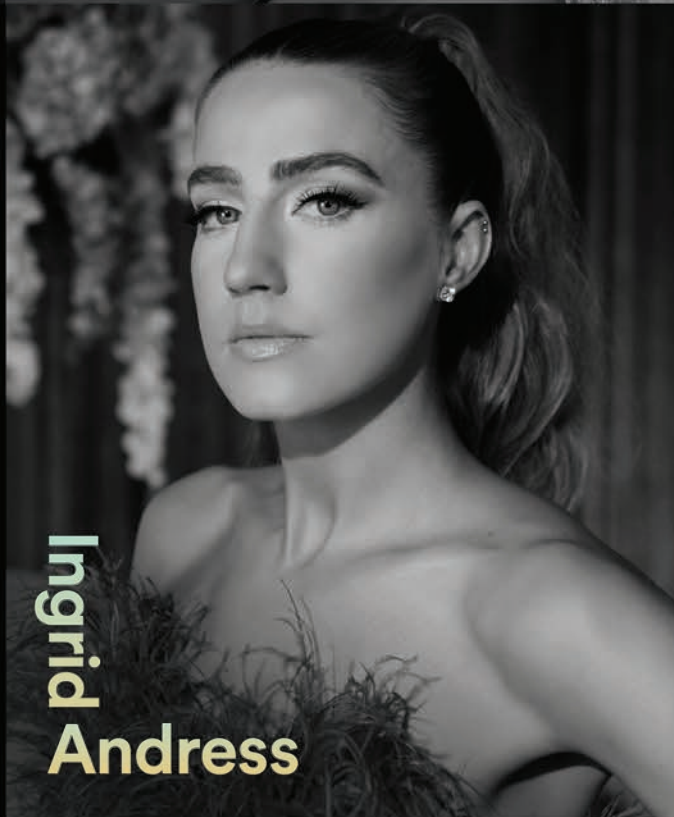


Doja Cat

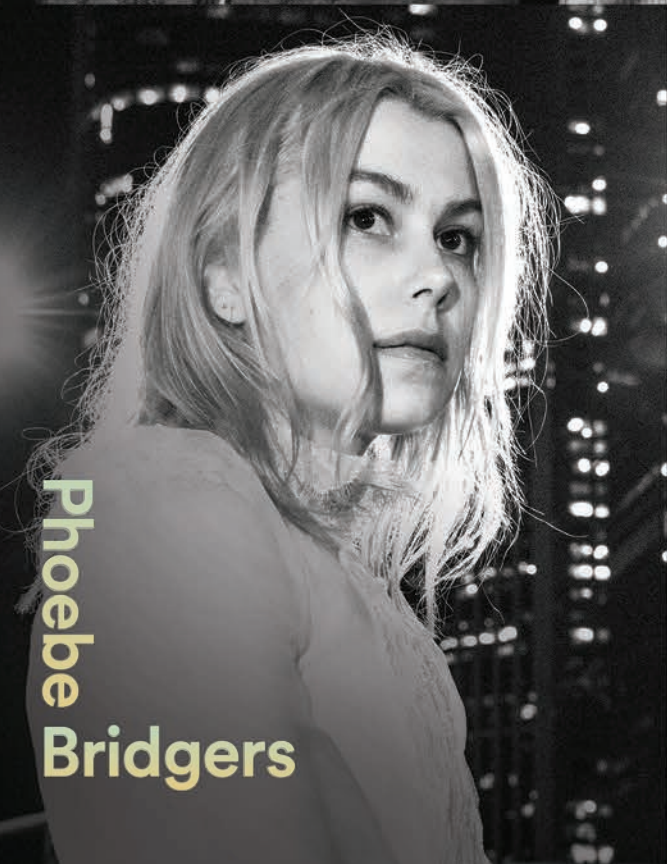


D Smoke

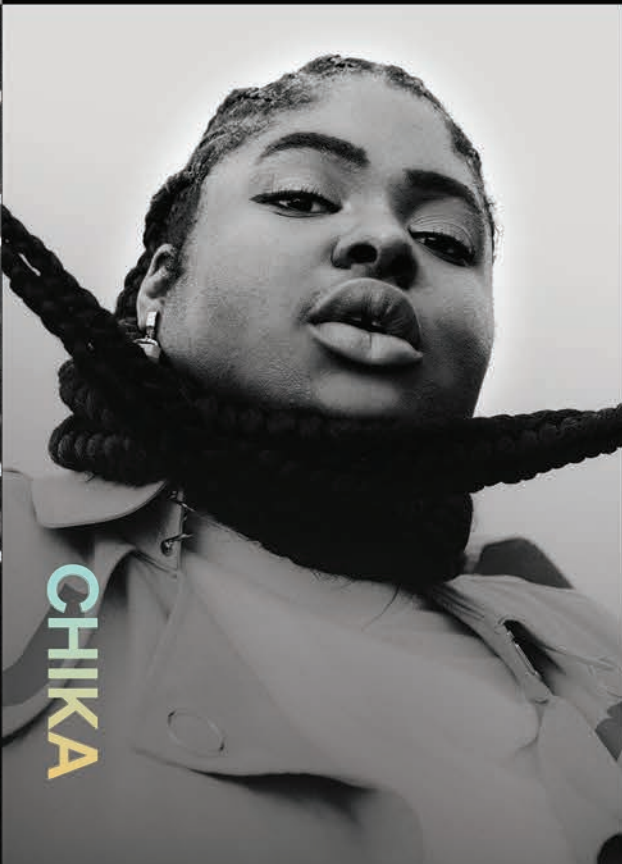
**Best
New
Artist
2021**

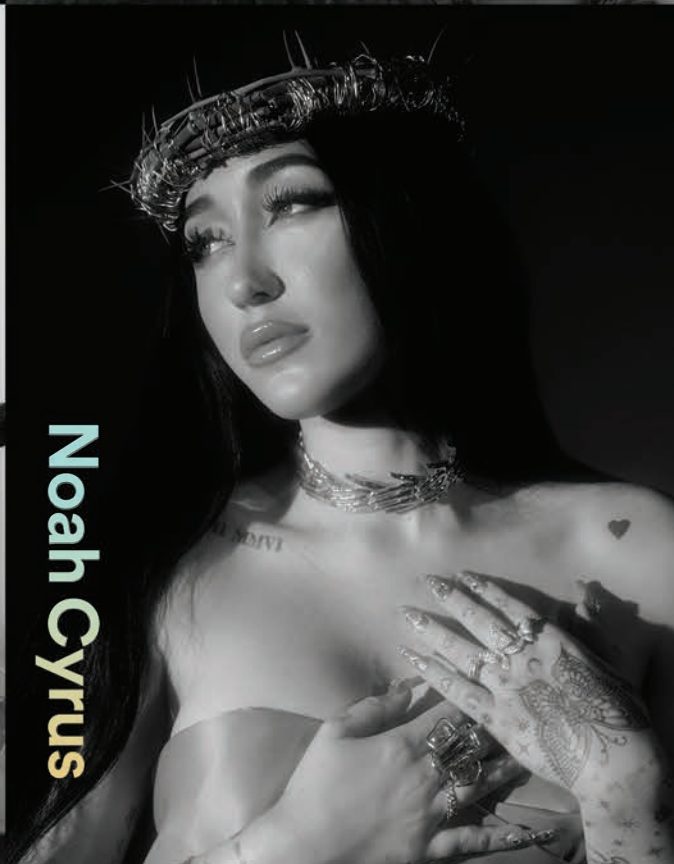
Ingrid Andress



Phoebe Bridgers



CHIKA



Noah Cyrus



Spotify Celebrates Best New Artist Nominees

The streaming music service highlights these eight musicians on the rise, representing diverse backgrounds, ages and genres, through their own stories. **By Jeremy Helligar**

The road to superstardom can be long and bumpy. Emerging artists need a strong support system to get there. Spotify aims to provide such support. For the last five years, the company has strived to be a major part of artist discovery and development through an annual campaign spotlighting the Best New Artist category. While Spotify will always champion proven chart-toppers, newcomers are just as vital to its fabric. All this is part of Spotify's commitment to highlighting rising talent in every genre. These are, after all, the performers who will become legends, and who, in time, will inspire tomorrow's newcomers. Spotify helps artists tell their stories while connecting them to listeners around the world. It's a mutually beneficial relationship in which musicians deliver true artistry and Spotify fulfills its ongoing tradition of recognizing talent at every level of success. Spotify's Best New Artist campaign is a cornerstone of that tradition. It highlights all the nominees, both on and off the platform, through social media, playlists and — when there's nothing stopping people from gathering — a special event honoring the category's contenders and celebrating their status among their peers as the brightest and most promising. Meet the class of 2021.

CHIKA

A visionary empath for the woke generation, the lyrical gangster and proud dog mom is using her rapid-fire rhymes for the greater good. Fans are hanging on her every word in droves, and she's already secured a spot as one of hip-hop's brightest and most talented young stars. The rapper's second EP, "Industry Games," has garnered her a nomination for Best New Artist and over 5.1 million Spotify plays. But who's counting?

D Smoke

This former California high school Spanish teacher is as skilled with instruments (he plays several of them) as he is with languages. But it's his rapping skills on his album "Black Habits" that turned this poignant rhymist and advocate for Black excellence into a Spotify star. "Since I dropped 'Inglewood High,' Spotify has been behind my projects. To be able to grow with a platform is a pleasure for an independent artist like myself."

Doja Cat

The empress of e-girl beauty is the Best New Artist nominee most likely to become a one-woman empire. The top of the charts may be new territory for her, but she's already made a mark as a dance video muse and fashion curator. Now the singer and rapper has evolved into a true triple threat; she has become Spotify's 24th most-streamed artist of the year.* And just like that, a dance and fashion star is reborn as a new pop star.

Ingrid Andress

The queen of feeling things keeps crossing accomplishments off her to-do list. In addition to making power suits hot again, she's a Best New Artist nominee for her first album, "Lady Like," which became Spotify's highest-streaming debut by a female country artist. "It's really special to see so many different genres of music all being acknowledged and embraced," Andress says. "I'm happy country music gets to join the party this year."

KAYTRANADA

Anyone who has heard the Haitian Canadian musician's work knows he's no ordinary talent. He's a wunderkind producer and a self-taught beat technician with the talent to help shape the sound of music in the coming years while cranking out big hits for himself and others. He appears on a whopping 185 official Spotify playlists, a feat of ubiquity that ensures his dance grooves will continue to keep listeners on their feet into the future.

Megan Thee Stallion

The talented rapper is living up to her equine moniker, galloping from one career high to the next. Right now, she seems unstoppable. She's both hot and smart: Besides being a high-impact rapper, the H-town savage is also an academic scholar studying health care administration. She has more than 2.78 billion streams and over 27 million monthly listeners* on Spotify, and now is up for a Best New Artist award. That's a lot of hotties.

Noah Cyrus

Musician, singer-songwriter, introspective podcaster and mental health advocate, Noah Cyrus continues her winning streak, having been added to 4.15 million Spotify user playlists. "I am so excited and honored to be nominated for something that recognizes my artistry," the "July" singer says. "It shows people are not just looking at you, but they're really listening and hearing your words. As a songwriter, that's the most rewarding thing."

Phoebe Bridgers

She's a prolific storyteller and Goth zealot whose work has landed her a spot on 231 official Spotify playlists. Now she is nominated for Best New Artist. Audiences are clearly moved by her artistry, but she's not just going to rest on her performing laurels. If the musical-artist thing somehow doesn't continue to work out (doubtful), she is already a record label CEO. Soon, she may be launching rising stars as well as being one.

*as of March 3, 2021

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PARTNER CONTENT
VARIETY.COM/SPOTIFY-BESTNEWARTIST

THE NEW TALK SHOWS

28
GRAMMY DARING
PHOEBE BRIDGERS IS
READY TO BREAK OUT



40
MUSIC BIZ ON SIMMER
DURING LOCKDOWN



46
JHENÉ AIKO CHANNELS
SPIRITUAL SOUND OF
HEALING



PHOEBE RISING

GRAMMY
IS
THROUGH

THRIVING

DARLING
BY
LIVESTREAMS

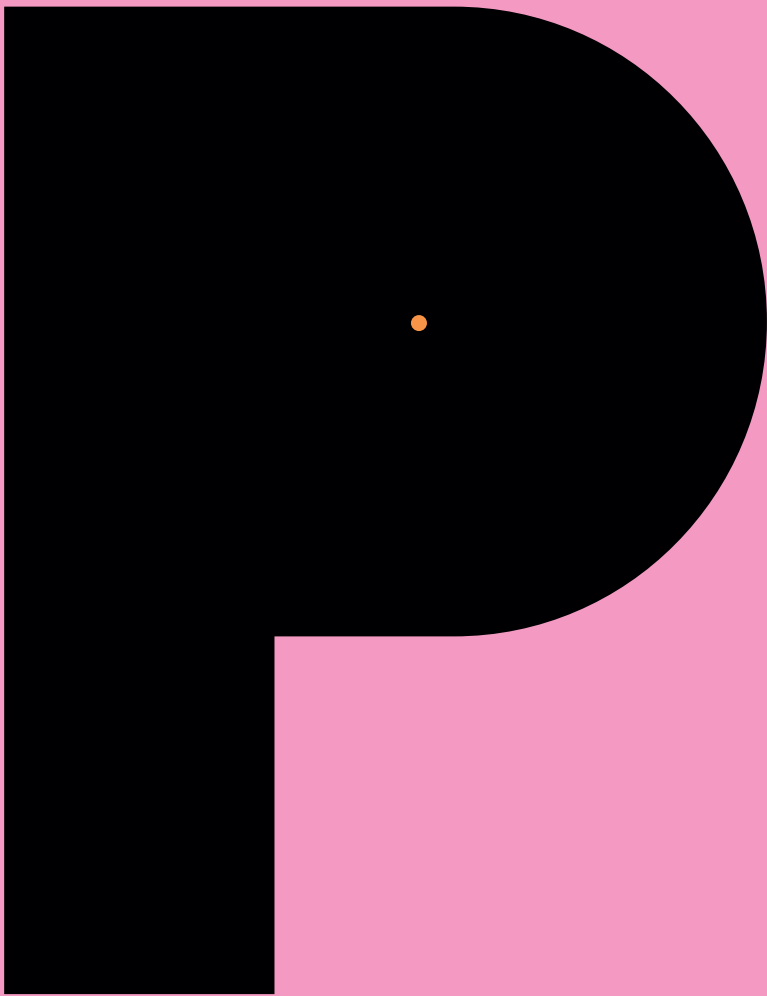
PHOEBE
BUILDING
AND

HER
SOCIAL

BRIDGERS
AUDIENCE
MEDIA



BY JEM ASWAD
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JANELL SHIRTCLIFF



hoebe Bridgers rose to indie-rock stardom the traditional way: by performing her incisive and plaintive songs for gradually growing audiences on tour, night after night. But she's grown to achieve mainstream recognition largely from the confines of her home, due to the pandemic.

"It feels very unreal, because my life has actually changed very little," Bridgers, 26, says with a rueful laugh about the momentous year that has seen her rack up four Grammy nominations, a string of successful live performances and feverishly positive album reviews. Clad in a decidedly unglamorous baseball cap and hoodie, she's speaking over Zoom from her new L.A. pad while her recently adopted puppy, Maxine, bounds around in the background. "Even though I'm at home, it's been a very suffocating time. There is something really weird about going through all this stuff alone."

Indeed, with the exception of cautious jaunts into the world for COVID-safe performances, photo shoots and interviews, she largely experienced her rising stardom from her tiny, recently vacated apartment in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Silver Lake, which she'd called home since she was 18. While much of the world's population has had to realign the borders of everyday life over the past year, Bridgers has seen hers expand dramatically.

"It would all be more tangible if a tour was happening — I would gradually be playing bigger venues, maybe getting more opportunities to go to lunch with someone cool, and see more fans and more tattoos of my lyrics," she says. "Instead, every once in a while somebody at the grocery store comes up to me, very respectfully. But yeah, other than that, I've just got my same little life going."

She's the first to admit that it's pretty good, as far as little lives go these days. But the impassioned response to her Grammy-nominated second album, "Punisher," has led to a breakneck schedule of interviews, livestream concerts and other screen-based demands for her attention. On the flip side, the pandemic has also kept some of the harsh realities of her growing celebrity status at phone's length.

"I'm slightly grateful for that, honestly," she says. "Also, a sense of community has grown in a way that it might not have if I was living in my own little world onstage every night. I feel like I'm a part of America living in a pandemic, the same as anybody."





“I FEEL LIKE I’M
A PART OF AMERICA LIVING IN A
PANDEMIC, THE SAME AS ANYBODY.”

—
PHOEBE

B R I D G E R S

It’s not hard to understand Bridgers’ appeal: the upper-octave beauty of her voice and the soft delivery of much of her music masks her blunt, intense and often highly personal lyrics. Yet “Punisher” — which takes its name from musician slang for an overly attentive fan — is poised to be her major breakthrough because of the multi-generational appeal of her music. She channels influences ranging from Elliott Smith and emo rock from her own youth, to the Laurel Canyon singer-songwriters she was raised on and even splashes of Gen X-era alt-rock favorites like Liz Phair and Belly.

“She is like no one I’ve ever worked with in my 48 years of doing this,” says Tony Berg, co-producer of her two albums, who has helmed albums by Aimee Mann, Michael Penn and others. “Her writing is nonfiction, but it has an allegorical and a metaphorical quality, so she uses incidents from her life but portrays them in ways that sound fictitious. And she can pick out things that will last.”

Berg cites a memorable line from “Garden Song,” a soft-sung anthem of sorts from “Punisher”: “The doctor put her hands over my liver/ She told me my resentment’s getting smaller.”

“Who else would put that in a song?” Berg marvels.

Bridgers’ lyrics reveal so much that a further explanation from her can feel superfluous. The ambivalence she feels about her semi-estranged relationship with her father? It’s captured in “Kyoto,” also from “Punisher.” Her more pronounced feelings about early mentor Ryan Adams, the singer-songwriter with whom she and others had an abusive relationship? They’re covered in “Motion Sickness,” from her 2017 debut album, “Stranger in the Alps.”

Along with her influences, Bridgers is a catalyzing member of a cohort of other young indie singer-songwriters. A serial collaborator, in the three years since releasing “Stranger in the Alps,” she’s dropped an EP as one-third of Boygenius, her harmony-heavy, ironically Crosby, Stills & Nash-styled “supergroup” with fellow female bards Julien Baker and Lucy Dacus; released an album with Bright Eyes founder Conor Oberst; formed her own label, Saddest Factory; and recorded songs with Fiona Apple, the 1975, Maggie Rogers, members of the National and even one of her key influences, Jackson Browne.

Unlike most musicians, she’s had a hectic, albeit virtual, gigging and interview schedule, with an impressive string of TV

performances and livestreamed concerts that range from a Verizon-sponsored full-band set at an empty 10,000-seat amphitheater to a “Jimmy Kimmel Live” spot where she sang “Kyoto” while wearing pajamas in her bathtub.

The most controversial of those performances was her February appearance on “Saturday Night Live”: Bridgers bashed her guitar on a loudspeaker at the finish of “I Know the End,” which concludes in screaming and chaos. Even though her sturdy Danelectro guitar was more dinged than destroyed — and male musicians have done worse things to their musical instruments on “SNL” — Bridgers encountered an immediate online backlash over her “wastefulness.” It culminated in a hilariously absurd Twitter exchange with 79-year-old folk-rock legend David Crosby, who called the gesture “pathetic.” In response, she called him a “little bitch.” And she’s not about to apologize now.

“I stand by it!” Bridgers laughs. “The fact that it made people so mad is kind of what’s punk rock about it. No thought whatsoever went into what it represented or meant: I’d never done it before, so might as well do it [on ‘SNL’], where it’s gonna be immortalized.”

The incident reinforced what Bridgers’ fans on Twitter already know: She is a formidable and seemingly fearless social media presence. Bridgers has figured out how to build her profile as a lockdown rock star. As her lyrics indicate, she’s not afraid to share whatever’s on her mind.

In addition to Crosby and Adams, Bridgers’ social media targets include Marilyn Manson, who is facing a battery of sexual misconduct allegations that Bridgers says were in line with his behavior during a visit she made to his home when she was a teenager.

“I had a friend whose parents worked on a TV show that he wanted to be a part of, and they knew I was a fan and brought me along to the meeting,” she recalls. “I heard him say racial slurs and rape jokes — and he was on his best behavior! I am not one of his victims, but the fact that I can corroborate the stuff he’s being accused of in some way is really expository to me.” She didn’t hesitate to share the experience when the accusations arose last month. (“These recent claims about me are horrible distortions of reality,” Manson said in response to the allegations.)

“Phoebe says a lot of wild shit on the internet — in and of itself, it’s a commentary,” says Baker, her close friend and sometime bandmate. “She modeled for me how to be less inhibited about the creative process but also about everything else: the way she answers questions, the way she conducts herself on social media and the way she smashes guitars onstage and screams in songs. It’s empowering to see Phoebe say and make and do exactly what she wants.”

“Can’t wait to fuck all my friends when this is over,” Bridgers tweeted a couple of days later.





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“SHE USES INCIDENTS FROM HER
LIFE BUT PORTRAYS
THEM IN WAYS THAT SOUND FICTITIOUS.
AND SHE CAN PICK OUT THINGS
THAT WILL LAST.”

—
TONY BERG

P R O D U C E R



Dress: The Vampire's Wife, Eyewear: Gentle Monster

It is not surprising to learn that Bridgers was a precocious child. “Phoebe was incredibly verbal, very early on,” according to her mother, Jamie Bridgers. “She was speaking very clearly at just over a year old, and other parents in our play group would hear her and be like, ‘What’s wrong with *my* kid?’”

Born and raised in Pasadena, Phoebe and her younger brother, Jackson, grew up in a house filled with the sounds of Southern California rock that her parents loved. Phoebe showed talent and a predilection for the stage from an early age. “When she was 6, she sang ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ for the school musical, a cappella, and when she got to the key change on the last verse, she totally put her back into it and belted it,” Jamie laughs. “One of the parents was like, ‘Wow, she’s going places!’”

Around that time she joined her first band — “Little kids doing Neil Young and Jimmy Cliff covers,” Jamie says — and followed with a series of bands in junior high and high school. She also was a regular busker at farmers markets in Pasadena and Hollywood.

However, the home life was not always harmonious. Jamie describes her marriage to Phoebe’s father as “volatile,” and the couple divorced in 2015. (After the split, Jamie launched a career as a standup comic — currently appearing on Uncabaret’s regular Zoom showcases — with her children’s enthusiastic support.)

As Phoebe grew older, she attracted more attention, both good and suspect, Jamie recalls. “People would say, ‘You should meet my friend the producer.’ And until she was 18, I would go with her and wait in the car or in the lobby,” she says. “Some people would say, ‘Ask your mom if she’d like a cup of coffee,’ but others were disappointed that her mom was right outside — and that was a huge red flag. I got a sense of some people being a little predatory.”

Bridgers connected with Adams through a mutual friend when she was 20. He released her first single, “Killer,” in 2015 on his Pax Americana label, becoming a lover as well as a mentor. Despite its unsavory backstory, “Killer” shows that by then she had attained her own sound: The melody has her trademark peaks

and valleys; her voice flips into a higher register on the chorus.

Asked about the song, she brings up Adams, albeit with a beat's hesitation.

"I think that song was the real turning point," she says. "It's actually something that ... Ryan Adams taught me, kind of. I was like, 'I don't wanna record this song because I think it's my best song and I'm saving it for my album.' He said, 'Why? Put out your favorite thing as fast as you can,' and I've taken that into my whole adult life. I learned a lot from him — and then I learned a lot about how *not* to treat people." (Adams said in a July 2020 open letter, "There are no words to express how bad I feel about the ways I've mistreated people through my life and career.")

But around the same time, something else happened that changed the course of her career: a brief — and lucrative — stint acting in television commercials, including two Apple ads, one of which featured her fronting an all-female band. The residuals "basically added up to an artist's grant that allowed her to make the record she wanted to make," Jamie says, referring to "Stranger in the Alps." "If she hadn't gotten that, she probably would have signed a shitty deal."

Another vital piece fell into place in February 2016, when Bridgers opened a show for Baker, who was riding a wave of praise for her debut album, "Sprained Ankle." The pair had what Baker describes as "instant-friend chemistry."

"When I saw her bashing the guitar on 'SNL,' I was like, 'This is a cultural moment,'" Baker says. "She's wearing this beautiful, ornate Gucci dress that is made to look like a skeleton" — Bridgers' visual theme for "Punisher" — "and the song starts out so controlled and beautiful and devolves into chaos. It's challenging ideas of sonic beauty, physical beauty, artistic beauty and what it means to be a female musician."

While Bridgers might also challenge other traditional ideas by dismissing the significance of four Grammy nominations, she summarizes her feelings by quoting a friend. "One of my favorite people called me and was like, 'If you hadn't gotten nominated, the Grammys would be bullshit establishment — but the fact that you are is the best thing to ever happen,'" she laughs. "Of course, it's a dream, and the most special part to me is to be nominated this year, with so many artists who made the records that got me through the pandemic."

Once past the Grammys, Bridgers plans to take some downtime — though she rarely holds still for long. She says she's been writing songs, but her lyrical impressions of the past year of pandemic lockdown, social upheaval and unimagined personal success may be elliptical, because she doesn't really do obvious.

"I think that success is uninteresting [to write about] and my misery is uninteresting, because everybody's going through it," she says. After a pause, she adds with a laugh, "I wrote a random love song, which is cool, because it's pretty happy, actually — and it shows how much I dissociate, because I wrote it in April. When everybody else was screaming, I was writing this very pleasant love song. It's been a wild time." ●

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**"IT'S
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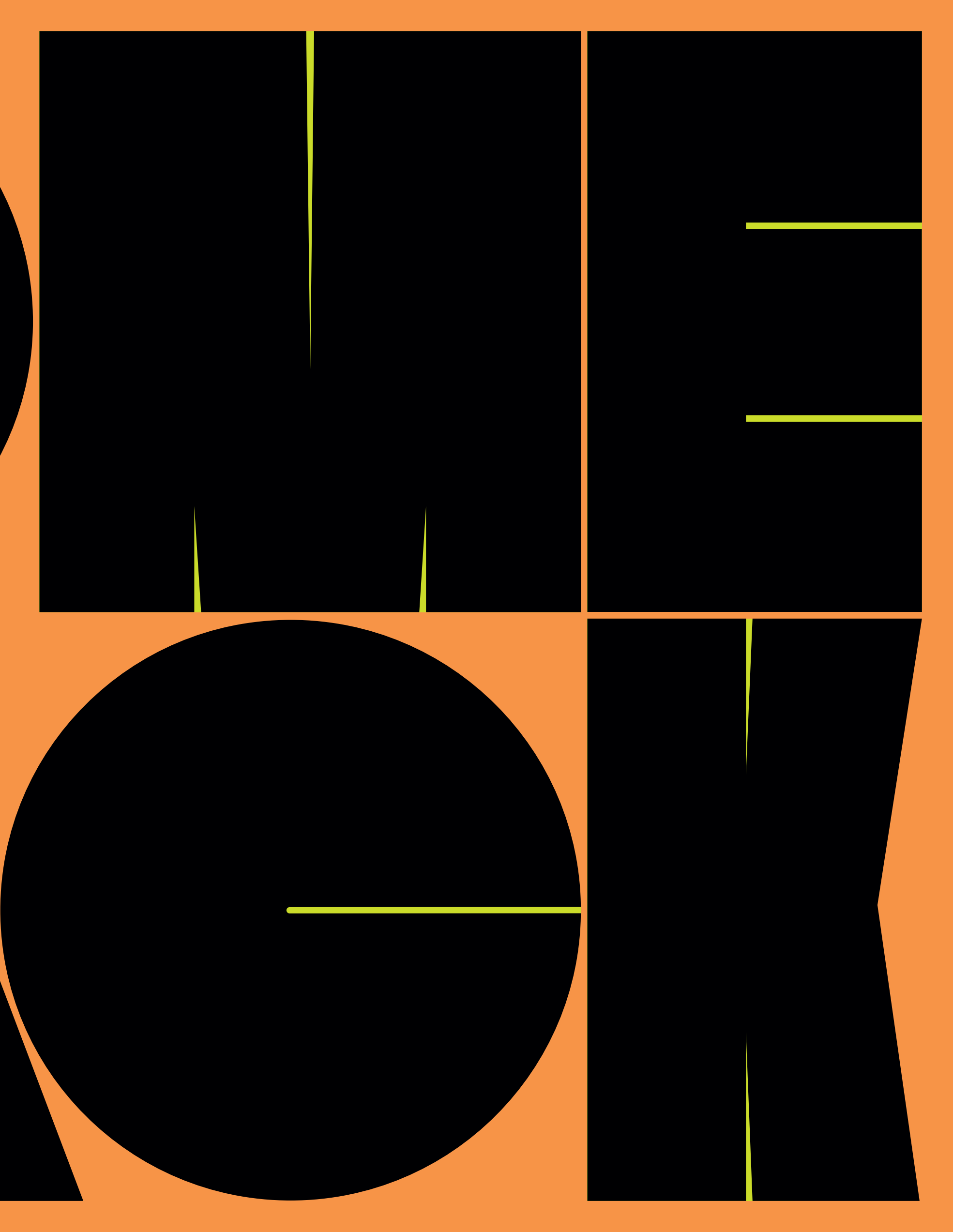
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**JULIEN BAKER
BOYGENIUS BANDMATE**



**T
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**PANDEMIC BLUES?
HARDLY. THE
MUSIC BUSINESS IS
READY TO ROCK AGAIN
AS LOCKDOWN
CONDITIONS EASE UP
AROUND THE WORLD.**



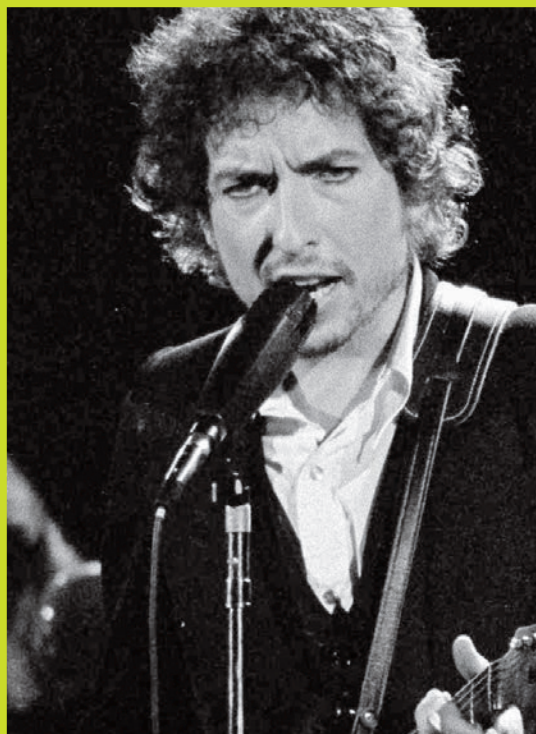


Is recorded music pandemic-proof? Data collected by the Recording Industry Assn. of America measuring U.S. music revenues in 2020 demonstrates the market's resilience. The RIAA year-end report, released Feb. 26, reveals that the industry as a whole grew 9.2% in 2020 to \$12.2 billion at estimated retail value.

It marks the fifth consecutive year of gains, as paid subscription services continue to expand their reach among the music-listening public — to the tune of \$10.1 billion in overall revenue generated, a growth of 13.4%. Streaming now accounts for 83% of all U.S. music industry earnings, which encompass physical sales, syncs and digital downloads.

The uptick in music consumption during lockdown has dovetailed with other booming screen-centric activities, from Netflix to Twitch to Clubhouse, but anything involving more than one human in close physical proximity has suffered economically or had to adapt.

Recording is only one aspect of the thriving global music sector. Here's a look at key trends and questions as the industry looks to rebound from the COVID-19 shock.



BOB DYLAN'S CATALOG SALE TO UNIVERSAL MUSIC PUBLISHING GROUP BROUGHT BETWEEN \$300 MILLION AND \$400 MILLION.

Jeff Robbins/AP

WILL WE SOON SEE A HALF-BILLION-DOLLAR CATALOG SALE?

BY GEOFF MAYFIELD

Bob Dylan's catalog deal with Universal Music Publishing Group fetched between \$300 million and \$400 million, 33,000 songs from Kobalt Music to Hipgnosis Songs Fund got around \$323 million and the masters from Taylor Swift's first six albums cost Shamrock Capital around \$300 million. In 2020 and into 2021, music IP is sizzling, with no sign of demand waning.

Most of the action has been in the song rights and publishing space, stirred by London-based Hipgnosis founder Merck Mercuriadis' aggressive pursuit of songwriters' shares.

That hunt began when Hipgnosis plunked down \$23 million for the catalog of rapper, writer and producer The-Dream in 2018. The company has gone on to spend more than \$2 billion on music assets. It started by betting on works by younger creators like the Chainsmokers becoming tomorrow's classics, but its focus soon extended to heritage acts like Neil Young, Fleetwood Mac, Barry Manilow and Chrissie Hynde, whose catalogs can command multiples of 20 or 25 times earnings.

"The number of assets is finite and getting smaller, and the number of buyers seems to be infinite," says veteran music attorney Peter Paterno of the fervor for music IP.

Adds Mark Mulligan, managing director of music and tech think tank MIDiA Research:

"What's driving the value of the asset isn't just how much money it's making — it's how much demand there is in the market for those assets. Revenue performance could increase by X, but the actual value of the asset might go up to Y because there are few assets in the market and everybody wants it."

What's fueling the interest of investors? Streaming allows songs to make money for a longer stretch with a more predictable revenue flow than when the industry relied on selling albums or singles. The potential of sync placements and samples adds icing to the cake, as does the notion that "song management" will allow more focus on individual works than a publisher, which is responsible for tens of thousands of works at any given time. Last, artists are willing to sell, in part because the pandemic has all but halted earnings they would have seen from touring and merchandise.

But just because you can cash out doesn't mean you should.

"If you believe the market's going to keep getting better, you shouldn't sell," warns Paterno. "I've been involved with a lot of deals on both sides when the artist who sold regretted it later."

Another noted attorney, Donald S. Passman, author of "All You Need to Know About the Music Business," concurs, offering historical examples of deals made too soon.

"Elvis Presley sold his artist royalties; Led Zeppelin sold their artist royalties. Those were big deals at the time, but in retrospect they turned out not to be such good deals," Passman says.

Even so, could demand soon drive a catalog's price to the \$500 million mark?

"There is that possibility because the market is overheated," says Mulligan. "[Looking at] the historical average prices paid, they've been going up and up for about three years now. The curve suggests that we will be getting to that sort of size deal."

Few will reveal their guesses publicly, but the short list of big fish suggested by *Variety's* sources include Paul McCartney, Bruce Springsteen, Barbra Streisand, the Eagles, Guns N' Roses, Metallica and Jon Bon Jovi.

"It's clearly going to happen," says one insider. "It's just a matter of when." 🎸

HOW IS THE CONCERT BUSINESS DOING?

BY JEM ASWAD

It may feel like the setup for a cruel joke, but against all odds the live-entertainment industry is faring better than many expected. Promoters and agents are looking to a partial reopening in the second half of 2021 — Live Nation has made a big bet on outdoor and smaller concerts returning in the late summer — while continuing to find ways to generate attention and revenue via livestreamed performances, virtual meet-and-greets and other activities.

In the U.K., Prime Minister Boris Johnson's announcement that "nightclubs and large events" can reopen by June 21 prompted Live Nation to announce rescheduled dates for three major festivals, selling some 170,000 tickets in four days. The company then saw its stock soar based on enthusiasm for its timetable, despite recently announced quarterly earnings in which revenue declined by a sobering 92%.

Live Nation CEO Michael Rapino says that if vaccinations and other factors go according to projections, many states may start seeing shows "in midsummer," noting that Southern outdoor venues can draw audiences "all the way into November." The company has made a similar vote of confidence for traditional arena tours

returning: The Weeknd's twice-postponed "After Hours" tour has been rescheduled for January 2022, with multiple dates added.

Those target dates seem "realistic," given vaccine projections, says ICM's Mark Siegel, the agency's head of worldwide concerts. However, every major festival in the U.S. scheduled before late August is moving its date or has been canceled. "Depending on the venues and the audience, things should pick up a bit in July and August, and even more in September." Siegel also says he's expecting the first months of 2022 to be "the biggest quarter in the history of the concert business."

Andy Gensler, executive editor of the live-entertainment trade journal Pollstar, notes that many venues in the South, particularly those specializing in country music, already have comparatively robust concert schedules lined up for March and April, and

points to the Pepsi Gulf Coast Jam in Florida, with headliners Luke Bryan, Brad Paisley and Lynyrd Skynyrd, which is still scheduled for early June. "Because so many states have different restrictions, concerts have been coming back in fits and starts all over the place," he says. "It's a bit of a free-for-all."

While the touring industry's eyes are very much on the horizon, promoters and agencies have found ways to pivot over the past year. Livestreamed concerts have made enormous progress and even become lucrative for certain artists. Rapper Travis Scott held a virtual concert in the video game Minecraft last May that drew an initial audience of 12.3 million — and 27.7 million unique participants including the four replays, according to Pollstar. In a more conventional terrestrial setting, British dance-pop singer Dua Lipa's "Studio



TRAVIS SCOTT'S IN-GAME MINECRAFT CONCERT IN MAY DREW AN INITIAL AUDIENCE OF 12.3 MILLION.



Epic Games

BOOM BOOM WOW

BY CATA BALZANO

WANT PROOF OF LATIN'S REACH? LOOK NO FURTHER THAN POP COLLECTIVE THE BLACK EYED PEAS, WHOSE SPANGLISH ALBUM "TRANSLATION," RELEASED IN JUNE 2020, HAS YIELDED FOUR NO. 1S ON BILLBOARD'S LATIN AIRPLAY CHART IN THE PAST 14 MONTHS.

"RITMO (BAD BOYS FOR LIFE)" FEATURING J BALVIN

STREAMS →

283.6 M

"MAMACITA" FEATURING: OZUNA, J. REY SOUL

STREAMS →

97.9 M

"GIRL LIKE ME" FEATURING: SHAKIRA

STREAMS →

58.8 M

"FEEL THE BEAT" FEATURING: MALUMA

STREAMS →

17.8 M

2054" livestreamed concert, with tickets priced at \$18.50, drew an estimated 5 million-plus viewers, according to her reps. K-pop titans BTS have staged a series of livestreamed concerts over the past months, drawing millions of viewers. Even acts with smaller fan bases, like alt-country singer Rhett Miller and former Barenaked Ladies frontman Steven Page, have made a decent living performing on platforms like StageIt, Nugs.net and Zoom.

"Does it replace concerts? No," Siegel says. "But money is being made, and people are busy and being creative." He points to virtual connections, which ordinarily are an add-on to concerts but have become a business of their own. "Zoom meet-and-greets are actually better in some ways," he says. "Normally the fan gets 30 or 60 seconds and a photo, but now they're going on for three, five, seven minutes — 'What are you drinking? Yeah, that's my drink too!' — because artists miss their fans so much."

Adds Gensler: "For the past year, every day we're getting so many calls — 'When are we coming back?' There's no better symbol of society's return than a concert." 🎧

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH MUSIC DISCOVERY?

BY ELLISE SHAFER



RAPPERS LIKE ERICA BANKS AND CJ HAVE FOLLOWED MEGAN THEE STALLION (LEFT) DOWN THE PATH OF TIKTOK-ASSISTED SUCCESS.

Photograph by Orin Fleurimont

Isabel Quinteros, senior manager of music partnerships and artist relations at TikTok, says the platform's algorithm "is why it's the best app for music discovery. ... TikTok distributes content based on performance and interests, allowing for good content to have a wide reach despite how many followers you may or may not have."

Indeed, Quinteros reports that more than 70 artists who launched from the platform have been signed to labels since she joined the company in April 2019. Major labels have been quick to snap up the artists with the largest followings — think Hitco Entertainment with D'Amelio; Warner Records with Banks and Nessa Barrett; and Curtis Waters with BMG — and are reaping the rewards of having an existing dedicated fan base that generates millions of streams with little to no marketing. Even more impressive: Five TikTok hits reached No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100.

The TikTok playground is extending to other music platforms too. Spotify's viral charts practically mirror TikTok's most popular tracks, while it's not unusual for Spotify's most popular playlist, Today's Top Hits — with more than 27 million followers — to favor TikTok trends. The last in line is often terrestrial radio, which, while nimbler than in past years when it comes to adding a song to a station's rotation, remains conservative in programming new or unfamiliar artists to its listenership.

"These Gen Z users, they don't need to listen to the radio to determine whether or not they want to buy a song," says Chris Anokute, an artist development specialist who founded the company Young Forever, where he manages artists such as Waters. "They're literally engaging on these social media platforms, seeing visual content synced to song, loving the song, identifying the song and then legitimately going to find the song." 🎧

It should come as little surprise that much of music discovery in 2020 happened on the small screen. Of the more than two dozen music streaming apps currently available for mobile phone users, TikTok, which finished the year in second place among the 100 most downloaded apps (behind Zoom), led in music industry breakouts. TikTok delivered an astonishing 1 billion combined video views for 176 songs.

To hear the company tell it, TikTok has become the great democratizer when it comes to giving everyone an equal chance of breaking out. Unproven newcomers with a following, like Dixie D'Amelio, have an instant shot. An Irishman who sings sea shanties? Nathan Evans is his name, and he landed a deal with Sony Music thanks to his rendition of "Wellerman." Rappers like Erica Banks ("Buss It") and CJ ("Whopty") become instant household names, following the road paved by the TikTok-assisted success of Megan Thee Stallion, while alt-pop has also found a home thanks to such artists as carolesdaughter ("Violent") and Jessia ("I'm Not Pretty").

THE GRAMMY ISSUE

HOW HAS SONGWRITING ADAPTED DURING COVID?

BY CHRIS WILLMAN

Collaboration has emerged as a pandemic problem unique to songwriters. "Writing over Zoom sucks," says Michelle Lewis, executive director of Songwriters of North America, whose advocacy on the part of creators helped lead to the historic Music Modernization Act of 2018. "If you've ever tried to sing 'Happy Birthday' over Zoom, you understand that it's a latency thing: You just can't do it."



SARAH HUDSON, WHO CO-WROTE "LEVITATING" BY DUA LIPA (PICTURED), SAYS COLLABORATING OVER ZOOM HAS BEEN A "BUZZKILL."

That goes for any form of jamming in the exchange of musical ideas. “It’s been a real buzzkill for me, personally, having to do Zoom writing, but obviously I am making it work,” says Sarah Hudson, the co-writer of such tunes as Dua Lipa’s “Levitating” and Katy Perry’s “Dark Horse.” “A lot of writing sessions are like blind dates, and it’s cold over the computer. But I can do it with a few writers I’m really close with.”

Sam Ashworth, who has co-written much of H.E.R.’s material and was Golden Globe-nominated with Leslie Odom Jr. for “Speak Now,” says he initially resisted Zoom co-writing, too, because “a lot of times songwriting sessions can be like counseling sessions. I don’t think people are as prone to get as personal over video as they can be in a room.” Yet Ashworth sees an advantage to the new way of writing that may survive the pandemic. “We’re spending less money, which is great,” he says, pointing out the savings on what used to be weeklong writing retreats, and his once-unthinkable Zoom collabs with artists in Colombia and Australia.

Adds Nashville-based Tracy Gershon, president of the song publisher Northern Lights Music: “Zoom isn’t going away, because it’s a cost- and time-effective way to get writers together that you normally couldn’t. I talk to writers who really like it. There’s an efficiency to Zoom; people don’t feel like they always have to go to lunch.”

Another drag on writers’ creativity: “if you’re not getting paid, you’re not thinking about your next song — you’re doing math,” says SONA’s Lewis. “Every songwriter I know has to have some alternate source of income. Sometimes it’s within the industry, managing artists or being a graphic designer, but most are driving Uber.” But, she adds, “you can actually make a decent living from streaming if you have some participation in the master recordings, because the recording is worth seven to 12 times the copyright in the streaming formula. That’s something that some successful songwriters who have leverage have been able to demand.”

Lewis is celebrating the Feb. 16 announcement that the Mechanical Licensing Collective had \$424 million in accrued historic royalties it will be handing out to writers and publishers, once it’s determined who’s rightfully owed the money in the coming months. “It’s the punchline to the MMA [of 2018]; it’s what we were fighting for,” she says of the so-called Black Box of unclaimed royalties. “We’re heading in the right direction. There’s still a lot of work to do” — especially with “short-form video stuff, like TikTok and things like that that are completely unlicensed. But as these new platforms are coming up, we’re better positioned to be in the room for the negotiations about how much we get paid for them.”



Alejandro Pedrosa/Bad Bunny

BAD BUNNY IS AMONG THE LATIN ARTISTS FLOURISHING ON STREAMING SERVICES IN 2020.



WHY IS LATIN MUSIC THRIVING?

BY CATA BALZANO

In the three years since Luis Fonsi’s “Despacito” became the first song of any genre to log a billion streams on Spotify (between the original and the remix featuring Justin Bieber, it’s now up to 2.6 billion), Latin music has only expanded its reach.

According to MRC Data, which tracks music consumption, Latin artists thrived on streaming services in 2020 — with a 14.8% gain, the genre led all others in growth — with acts like Bad Bunny, J Balvin, Rosalía and Karol G driving momentum.

“Something we’re seeing, and it’s a big difference, is that Latin artists are doing it in Spanish,” says Victor Gonzalez, president of Universal Music Latin. “The recognition is that music in Spanish is breaking barriers in the U.S. through streaming.”

Alex Gallardo, president of Sony Music U.S. Latin, agrees. “Streaming definitely changed the ecosystem in the music industry,” he says. “Prior to this era, if we wanted our music in Germany, we needed to convince someone in German radio or German TV to play our music. The good thing about streaming and this globalization is that we skip those gatekeepers and we can get directly to the fans.”

Reggaeton and Latin trap lead the new surge, but streaming is lifting cumbia and Regional Mexican too — take Snoop Dogg’s recent teaming with Banda MS on “Qué Maldición.”

Indeed, successful collaborations have given Latin a big look in the pop world — they include Dua Lipa with Bad Bunny, J Balvin with Justin Bieber, and the Weeknd and Maluma track. “We hear from all our label partners, ‘Hey, all of a sudden everyone is calling to collaborate with our artists, and that never happened before,’” says Mia Nygren, Spotify’s managing director for Latin America.

Adds attorney Marjorie Garcia, who represents several Latin acts: “It’s not just Anglo artists. Italian artists reach out to me, Portuguese artists — it’s global. The streaming numbers are killing it, so when they do these collaborations, they get a boost on their monthly listeners.”

The enthusiasm is spreading to the brand world. Witness Balvin’s recent deals with McDonald’s, Corona and Guess, which Garcia negotiated. “Whereas before you were lending your name and likeness to a brand, in the past couple of months, the type of deals that I’m doing have all involved equity,” she says. “Both the brand and the artist are looking for long-term gains.”

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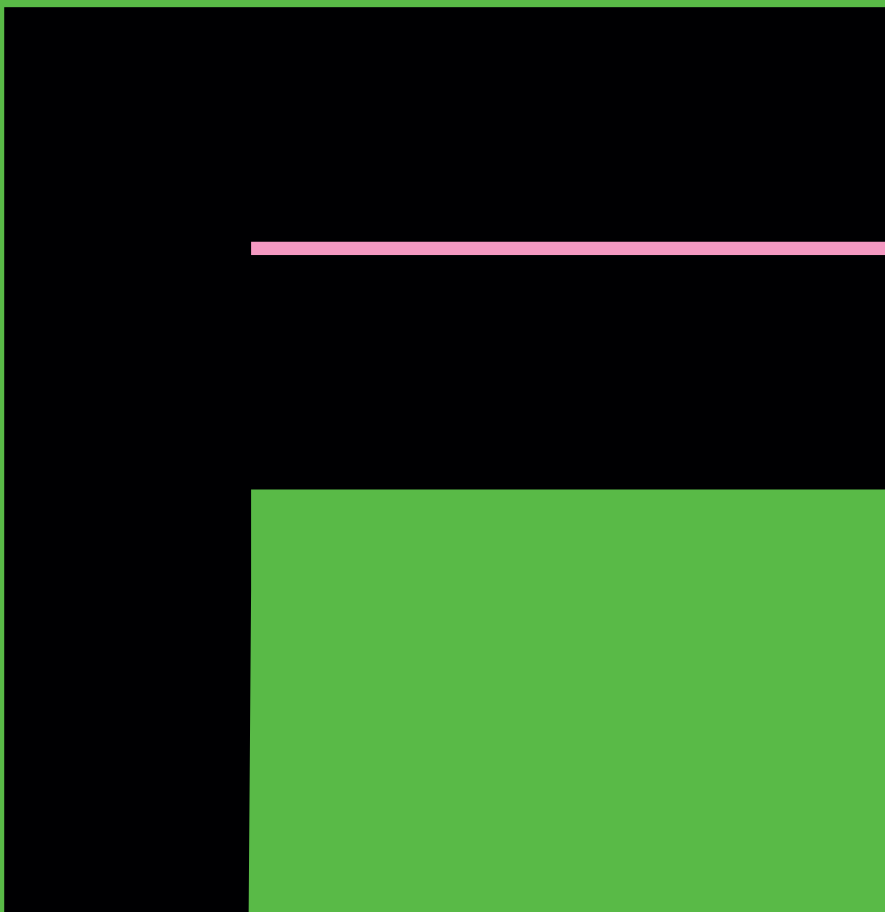
ALCHEMIST
'CHILOMBO'

**SO THE
OF
HEAVENING**



BY
ELLISE

SHAFFER



or Jhené Aiko, a Grammy nominee in three categories, songwriting and healing are cosmically connected. No, really: For her album of the year contender “Chilombo,” the 32-year-old singer-songwriter incorporated crystal sound bowls or “singing bowls” — a Tibetan tradition in which the round vessels, when played, vibrate at a certain frequency connected to a chakra — into each of its 20 tracks.

Buddhist monks have used sound bowls for centuries to aid in relaxation and meditation. Aiko discovered them when she was a teenager. “I was really using them for myself — like therapy — an alternative to self-medicating and not dealing with how I’m feeling,” she recalls. “I just found them very relaxing and soothing, and even addictive to play, like literally the motion of playing the sound bowls felt good to me.”

For the project, a soul-comforting, stripped-down manifesto of her personal growth, Aiko invested in crystal alchemy sound bowls, which are made of quartz but infused with precious gemstones and metals that give the bowls different healing properties, she explains. She says the bowls felt natural with the evolution of her sound, which has become much more acoustic and reliant on instrumentals since 2017’s “Trip,” as opposed to the digitized beats that can be found on her 2014 debut album, “Souled Out.”

To employ the bowls correctly, Aiko researched the individual chakras they represent, making sure that they aligned with the “Chilombo” track list. Sentimental songs like “Pray for You” spoke to the heart chakra in the key of F sharp, while more sensual tracks, like “B.S.” with H.E.R. or “PU\$\$Y Fairy (OTW),” wrap around a sustained D note, which serves to activate the sex organs, she says.

Aiko’s longtime partner, rapper Big Sean — who features on the album’s track “None of Your Concern” — surely isn’t opposed when work bleeds into their home life. But in using the sound bowls as a spiritual guide, she is equally looking to connect with her fans — and help them to heal as well.

A Los Angeles native, Aiko grew up surrounded by music. Her father, Karamo, dreamed of becoming a musician as a young adult, and passed his passion for music on to his five children. As the youngest, Aiko may not have had a say in what was played in the house, but she loved it nonetheless — Dr. Dre, 2Pac, Brandy, TLC, Alanis Morissette, Fiona Apple and the Spice Girls were among the artists in heavy rotation.

“AS I’M GETTING OLDER, I’M EMBRACING ALL SIDES OF MYSELF, EVEN THE PARTS THAT SEEM SCARY OR THAT I HAVE TRIED IN THE PAST TO SUPPRESS.”

—
JHENÉ

When Aiko was 5, her sisters, Mila J and Miyoko, formed the R&B group Gyrl with Paulette Maxwell, giving Aiko a firsthand look at the music industry. Karamo built a home studio in their garage, and Aiko would listen to them harmonize in awe. Gyrl soon caught the attention of Chris Stokes, founder of label The Ultimate Group, who would eventually become Aiko's manager as well. Though Aiko was due to release her debut album in 2003 via Ultimate, she decided to focus on her education instead, and the album never came to fruition.

Aiko says her sisters' singing helped her establish her priorities.

"I learned to keep my family close from watching them navigate the music industry," she says. "I also learned that things take time, in this industry especially. ... I learned to always take my time and to always stay true to myself and make the kind of music I want to make."

Aiko remembers writing her first song at age 6, moved by Raven-Symoné's 1993 single "That's What Little Girls Are Made Of," which was released when Raven-Symoné was 7. "I was inspired by her because she was young and small, and I always had been really small," Aiko says. "I remember looking up to her and wanting to write a rap of my own."

She delivers the rap without flinching: "It's the J, uh, the really funky one / I could rap you up in every single way / Can I play / If I can, you could see me like every single day / C'mon, don't you want to play / If you be like me / You a G, uh."

"I pretty much think in rhyme," Aiko says. "Thoughts just come to me, either one-liners or a whole concept. So I got into the habit of just always writing things down. I have notebooks and lots of notes in my phone, so that when I'm in the studio — whether I'm working on my music or a feature — I just open up my notebook."

For "Chilombo," released in March 2020 and up for album of the year, progressive R&B album and R&B performance, for "Lightning and Thunder," her duet with John Legend, Aiko has come into her own as both an artist and a songwriter. Presenting a raw portrait of a woman who has loved, lost and learned from the experience, the collection takes the listener on an emotional ride: from anger ("Triggered") to sorrow ("Mourning Doves") to reflection ("Pray for You").

In addition to her three nominations, Aiko will have another personal Grammy first: host. She'll be the face of the Grammys' Premiere Ceremony that begins at noon on the day

of the awards, and is set to include performances by Burna Boy, Terri Lyne Carrington + Social Science, Jimmy "Duck" Holmes and Rufus Wainwright as well as a tribute to Marvin Gaye.

Aiko aimed for "Chilombo" to show "all sides" of her, which is part of the reason she chose her actual surname as its title.

"A lot of people don't know that that's my last name," Aiko says with a laugh. "Aiko is one of my middle names. I'm a big fan of Mary-Kate and Ashley, so I was like, Mary-Kate, Jhené Aiko — OK."

Aiko has chosen not to go by her full name, Jhené Aiko Efuru Chilombo, because for a long time, she didn't feel it was truly hers. When her father was a young adult, he changed his last name to Chilombo (she declines to reveal his original surname). His shift of identity led to a sense of loss and confusion for young Aiko.

"Growing up, I felt a little disconnected from it because I knew that it wasn't a name that if I typed it up, I could find family," Aiko says. "I felt like I didn't have any roots in it."

But as she got older, Aiko researched the etymology of the word and found that "chilombo" means "wild beast" in the Bantu language Chichewa. "I just loved that," Aiko says. More important, she and her father came up with their own definition of the word: "We broke it down and said, 'chi' is life, 'l' is for love, 'om' is om, 'b' is the foundation — because 'b' comes from 'foot' in Egyptian hieroglyphics, which means 'foundation' — and 'o' is everything and nothing, infinity, wholeness."

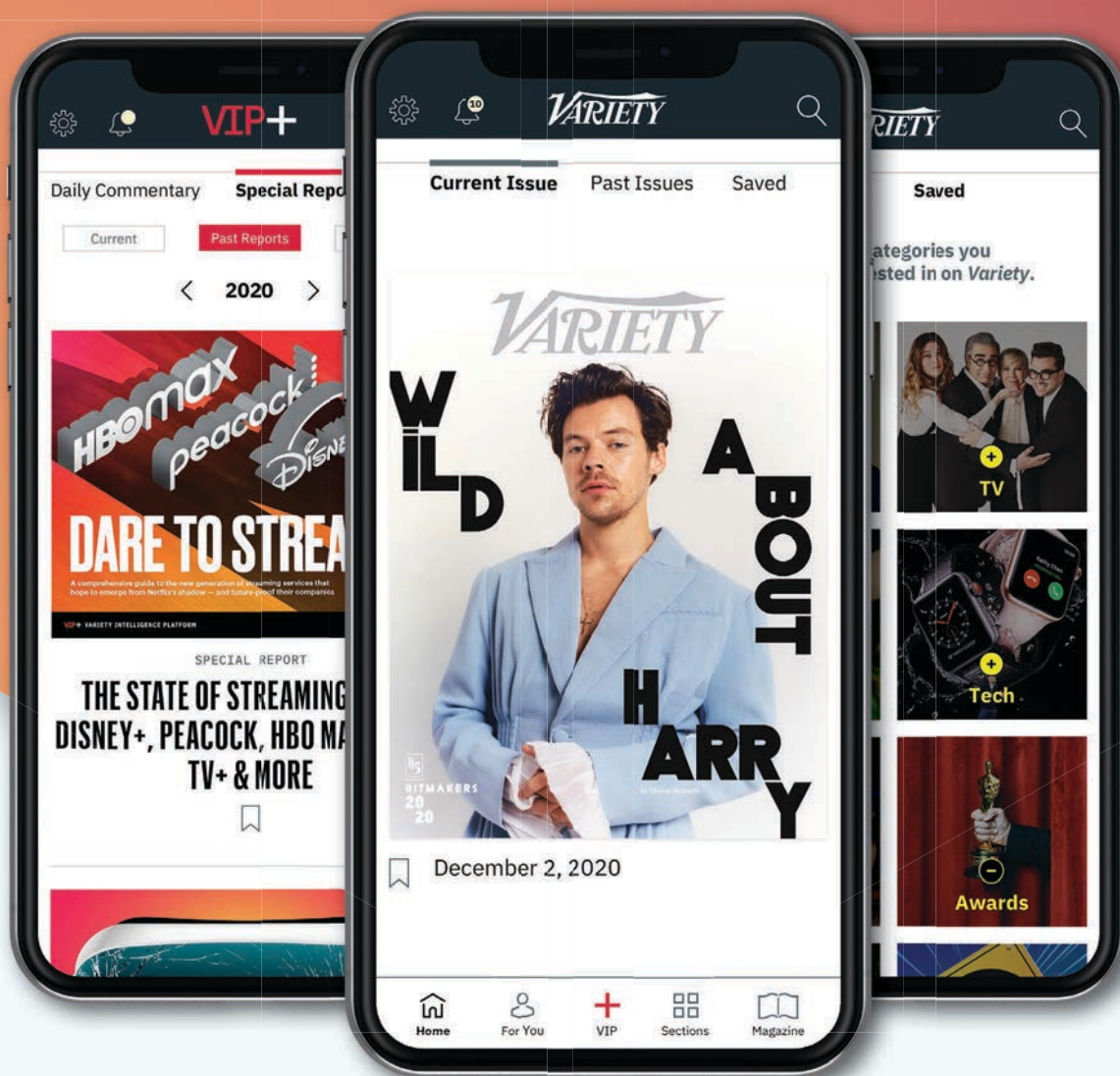
Deciding to name her third album "Chilombo" represents just that to Aiko — finally being whole and contented within herself. "I felt like it was introducing people to me in my completeness," she says. "Because as I'm getting older, I'm embracing all sides of myself, even the parts that seem scary or that I have tried in the past to suppress."

Within the order of the tracks on "Chilombo," Aiko also wants to reflect a circular journey of growth and healing — emerging from a certain moment in life as a better person. Much of the album was recorded on the Big Island of Hawaii, and Aiko came to view herself and the story of the album as a volcano.

"In life, nothing is linear," she says. "It's not like a perfect starting point and then you reach the mountaintop. There's a bunch of ups and downs, times that are more dramatic than others. The volcano was something that I was really inspired by. As a person, I can be as fiery as a volcano, but when it settles, I can be as beautiful as the new land that creates new life."

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Emily Lazar

“Always serve the song and tell the story.”

By Shirley Halperin



“It’s that perfect combination: Great artist. Great music. Great production. Great mixing. Great mastering. *Voilà!*” says award-winning mastering engineer Emily Lazar, whose work is often the last step in the music-making process and the one whose magic

can make the difference between a song sounding good or great. For the 2021 Grammys, she has 10 projects in contention, including three in the album of the year category — Coldplay’s “Everyday Life,” Haim’s “Women in Music Pt. III” and Jacob Collier’s

“Djesse Vol. 3.” Her résumé also includes seminal releases by Vampire Weekend, Beck and Sia. Lazar’s mixing and mastering mothership is New York’s The Lodge, which she founded in 1997 and where she’s worked on some 4,000 records. Listen up!

Things you didn’t know about Emily Lazar



Age: 49

Hometown: Rye, N.Y.

Industry idol: Bob Ludwig

Remastering the masters: She was invited to remix the Beatles’ “Abbey Road” and the Rolling Stones’ “Goats Head Soup.”

Cause she cares most about: Her recently launched “Moving the Needle” initiative aims to close the gender gap in music making.

•→ **How do you step in as the last person in the process and understand what the artist is trying to do?**

That’s actually an important part of my process. I make a huge effort to have a dialogue and understand the big picture. What are we trying to do here? What is this about? What was going on in your life? My goal is to always serve the song and tell the story. We’re that last-chance Texaco to gas up, making sure we’ve done everything we possibly can to help them give birth to that baby and put it out in the world.

•→ **As streaming music providers go, Tidal’s audio quality is superior. What do you make of Spotify’s new “hi-fi” option?**

I’ve been demanding this — like, screaming from the rafters that this needs to change. It’s a long time coming, and Spotify — love them, great platform, super easy, everyone uses it — sounded awful. It’s a disservice to the artists and to the people who are crafting records. And it’s a huge disservice to the consumer.

•→ **You’ve worked with many rock bands, but Jacob Collier feels like a pivot into the avant-garde.**

Jacob, as a musical being, is on a level that very few people can truly understand. He is one of a kind: part mad scientist, part harmonic genius. If we were awarding people on sheer talent or musical prowess, he should get a Grammy the size of Idaho. He’s also very thoughtful and provocative with his ideas and the way he sees the world. And I could say the same about the women in Haim and about Coldplay in getting to understand their vision.

When we think about Mozart or Beethoven, they almost seem like fictional figures, but they were people who wrote music and were ridiculously gifted. I sometimes can’t believe how blessed I am to come in contact with this many Beethovens and Mozarts. It seems not from this world. I definitely feel humbled being around them. 🎧