

Conscience Calls: 2020 Mix Album

No one needs reminding that 2020 was a hellacious year. For me, trying times are when I need music most. Whether I'm [making it myself](#), finding comfort and strength in the contributions of friends (Sean, Zach, Kevin!), or luminaries (Springsteen, Pearl Jam, Ani, NIN... NKOTB!), or seeking out new voices to meet the moment (H.E.R.), I have long looked to music to help me process my feelings about myself and the world around me.

This my 17th annual mix album, and though it chronicles a turbulent time, it is one of my favorites. The Coronavirus has forced a sort of worldwide shared experience, and there's a chronology in these songs that I think will resonate with you even when the music itself might not. It's certainly the most diverse collection of songs I've ever assembled, and it is the only time I can recall all of the entries having been released in the calendar year represented.

I hope you find—or are reminded of—something here that adds something positive to your life.

- David Ullman, January 2021

"Dance of the Clairvoyants" by Pearl Jam - Released in January with a series of Mach I-III music videos gradually revealing the band performing against a maelstrom backdrop of dramatic stock footage, the first single from Pearl Jam's eleventh studio album turned out to be very aptly named. Lyrics like, "numbers falling off the calendar floor / stuck in our boxes, windows open no more" and "when every tomorrow is the same as before" seem downright prophetic now. The title is perfect, as it also does make you want to, "dance... away [your] circumstance." The song is written by the whole group, and [the band members are all playing different instruments than usual on the recording](#). The result is a distinctly new sound for Pearl Jam. An album produced over three years, *Gigaton* was well worth the wait. I pre-ordered the vinyl package from the band's website, which came with a "Dance of the Clairvoyants" seven-inch single. The day it arrived, I started capturing an unboxing video for the Long Walk Short Drink YouTube channel that turned into an effusive 20-minute review of the record. Have a look at that [here](#), and listen to *Gigaton* wherever you get your music. Thirty years into their career, this seminal Seattle quintet is making music as vital as ever. They did a slew of cool things this year to commemorate the new album and connect with fans (and voters) despite the inability to tour. I talk more about those activities in the year-end roundup episode 86 of LWSD (beginning at 2:11:00), which you can listen to [wherever you listen to podcasts](#).

"Your Touch" by Nine Inch Nails - The day before *Gigaton* came out at the end of March, Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross dropped two surprise entries into their *Ghosts* series of instrumental albums. With the world on lock-down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the duo offered Together and Locusts as [a free download from their website](#) and released them on streaming services as well. From nin.com:

AS THE NEWS SEEMS TO TURN EVER MORE GRIM BY THE HOUR, WE'VE FOUND OURSELVES VACILLATING WILDLY BETWEEN FEELING LIKE THERE MAY BE HOPE AT TIMES TO UTTER DESPAIR – OFTEN CHANGING MINUTE TO MINUTE. ALTHOUGH EACH OF US DEFINE OURSELVES AS ANTISOCIAL-TYPES WHO PREFER BEING ON OUR OWN, THIS SITUATION HAS REALLY MADE US APPRECIATE THE POWER AND NEED FOR CONNECTION.

MUSIC – WHETHER LISTENING TO IT, THINKING ABOUT IT OR CREATING IT – HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE THING THAT HELPED US GET THROUGH ANYTHING – GOOD OR BAD. WITH THAT IN MIND, WE DECIDED TO BURN THE MIDNIGHT OIL AND COMPLETE THESE NEW GHOSTS RECORDS AS A MEANS OF STAYING SOMEWHAT SANE.

GHOSTS V: TOGETHER IS FOR WHEN THINGS SEEM LIKE IT MIGHT ALL BE OKAY, AND GHOSTS VI: LOCUSTS... WELL, YOU'LL FIGURE IT OUT.

From the Together collection, "Your Touch" was the track I found myself putting on repeat. The portentous opening soon gives way to an ascending, quintessentially Trent-Reznor sounding piano sequence reminiscent of "Leaving Hope" from the 2002 *Still* record—one of my favorite pieces of music ever.

In 2020, Nine Inch Nails was [inducted to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame](#); and in addition to a few new film scores, the band released a series of [provocative pandemic-themed t-shirts](#) and a modular face mask kit with expressive patches "[to match your mood](#)."

"House Party (edit)" by New Kids On The Block - My sister hipped me to this delightful collaboration between NKOTB, Big Freedia, Naughty By Nature, Jordin Sparks, and Boyz II Men. Part fundraiser and part public service announcement, this pop song is pure joy. Coming out at the end of April, this track reminds me of the moment during the early days of the pandemic where there seemed to be a general sense of solidarity. Plus, I got to see my favorite New Kid dancing with *his* kids at home in the socially-distanced [music video](#), which also includes a handful of very fun cameos.

"Little Camus" by Hamell On Trial - Quoting Hunter S. Thompson in [the liner notes to *The Pandemic Songs*](#), Hamell reminds us, "When the going gets weird the weird turn pro." Ed recorded nine songs in three days "inspired" by life during the lockdown in his Ossining, NY apartment on an \$80 Android cell phone. After he and his son Detroit witnessed a line seven-blocks long of their neighbors waiting for food from a truck, Hamell decided to quickly record the songs he'd been writing to perform on his regular Facebook live-stream concerts and release them as a limited edition CD to raise money for food bank charities. This opening track gives a nod to the 1947 novel, *The Plague*, which I've had in my audiobook cue for years but never started. [The lyrics](#) paint a pretty good picture of daily life during quarantine filtered through Hamell's wicked sense of humor.

"Endless" by Pinegrove - Listening to this song, you'd think it was written in response to the isolation imposed on all of us by COVID-19. However, it was released in January 2020 by this young band from New Jersey. Pinegrove was brought to my attention by one of my favorite singer/songwriters, Joe Pug. Pug started doing weekly "[Social Distancing Concerts](#)" early in the pandemic. "Live from a water-damaged basement in Prince George's County Maryland," Joe played through his recorded catalog while occasionally taking questions from the live-stream comments, chatting with special guests, reading his favorite poems, and sharing recommendations. I'm very grateful for this one.

"Grateful" by Jewel - The now 45-year-old Alaskan songbird rushed the release of this track from her forthcoming twelfth studio album to lend a little comfort during what she describes as

"this miserable triad of the virus in combination with an economic downfall and a mental health crisis." Anyone under the impression that Jewel is some sort of naive, Pollyannish pop star need only glance at her life story. She's long been an inspiration to me—both as a songwriter and a person whose strategies for living resonate. I hadn't realized it until writing this, but perhaps it's no coincidence that shortly after this song came out I switched my long-held practice of journaling my daily activities in terms of productivity to listing them as expressions of gratitude. Though there's still no street date for her new record, Jewel commemorated the 25th anniversary of her debut album, *Pieces of You*, with a beautiful [boxset reissue](#) which included a "ticket" to a private Livestream concert in which she played the songs in sequence to a socially-distanced theater audience of friends. Her old pal and songwriting partner Steve Poltz also hopped on stage for a few memorable stories and duets. If "Grateful" is representative of her new record, it should be a great one.

"Love Won't Stop" by Adrian Davis - University of Minnesota Gospel Choir Director Adrian Davis wrote this uplifting dance number while sheltering in place during the pandemic. "The world has stopped. It's come to a complete halt with COVID-19... but the one thing that I definitely say that hasn't stopped is love," Davis explains in the outro to [this video](#) that I pieced together from student-submitted clips for the College of Liberal Arts' virtual commencement ceremony. Davis published [a lyric video](#) on his YouTube channel in late April, and my colleague Anabel Njoes had the idea to give CLA's class of 2020 an opportunity to "walk" at graduation by dancing in their caps, gowns, and spirit wear along with photos, pets, roommates and family to the song. It was truly a pleasure to work on and consistently moving to see these students dance in the face of tragedy. The joy and creativity on display in the submitted clips are evident and made my job easy. Any editors reading this know how many countless times you see and hear things as you work on something like this, but when that young lady does what seems like an endless pirouette before the last set of choruses?! It gets me every time.

"Cold Comfort" by Glen Hansard - On May 3, Hansard posted [this](#) "handmade video for a homemade song written this week for the time that's in it." The clip is built around a lock-down shot of Glen sitting at a garden piano in his backyard. As water sprinkles on him from a sunny sky he sings, "it's little comfort I know, but it's raining down all over the world right now." B-roll of Hansard's kitchen and bucolic homelife play out, portraying an idyllic setting in which to pass the quarantine. On his Instagram page [@thegingerman222](#), the self-proclaimed "Singer-Sowingmachine" has posted often during the pandemic. In particular, I enjoyed his 50th birthday live session, during which his pal Eddie Vedder joined in to wish him well and The Frames 30th anniversary "Stay at Home" Instagram gig. For me, "Cold Comfort" marks the end of a sort of innocence that seemed to pervade the long days and short weeks of the first month or so of shelter-in-place. The "we're in this together" sentiment was already fraying, as protective face masks became politicized and the economy seemed of more concern to many than public safety. Still, the first few times I heard Glen sing the final lines, "it's little comfort I know, but the worst will soon be over," they carried a cautious hope. In the video, the slightly unsettling vibe of the unresolved closing chord is eased by the reveal that the rain soaking the singer is coming from a watering can. You even hear Hansard chuckle as the song starts playing again and he says to his friend emptying the can, "OK, stop!" Without that comedic relief, and considering what would happen in the coming weeks, the song ends ominously.

(9.3) These nine-point-three seconds represent the [nine minutes and 30 seconds](#) Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of George Floyd.

"My Reality" by Kevin Conaway - I don't think I've included any of Kevin's music on one of my mix albums before this, but since 2010 he has been here in spirit. In fact, "mix album" is a term I believe he came up with the following year. For the last decade now, he and I have gone back and forth in these liner notes crediting the other for his respective contributions to our yearly mix-making practice. He borrows [the annual, semi-autobiographical approach I've been using since 2004](#), and I've adopted his use of the word "album" to connote the compilation's careful arrangement as an artistic statement. One of my long-held "rules" for the songs I include on these collections is the lyrics should be something I would want to have written and sung from my own experience. Had that not been the case in 2010, Kevin's "[Canadian Girl](#)" would surely have made the cut! Though still a consideration, that criterion has evolved away from the strictly autobiographical—this year especially. However, this track from his new EP, *A Deafening Silence*, captures the outrage and frustration I've felt grow over the last four years as facts and truth have been undermined to the point of pathological denial and even outright insurrection. It's a credit to the craftsman, but more than a little troubling to consider [the lyrics of this song](#) could be coming from either extreme of the ideological spectrum. For me, the "torches lit and weapons drawn" passage reveals with which "side" the singer aligns. Of course, I don't know Kevin's inspiration, but I do know it's a helluva thing he's articulated here. As a songwriter, I'm jealous. As a friend, I'm proud. As a fan and someone who looks to music to process my feelings and reactions to the world around me, I'm thankful. To stick to our shared rules of fitting the mix albums to the length of a CD, this is one of the tracks I had to edit for length. To hear the full version [visit Kevin's website](#) or look him up on whatever platform you use to listen to music. You should also [check out his mix albums](#). They are truly outstanding!

"Fight The Power (2020 Remix)" by Public Enemy - Had this remix not been made, it's very likely the original 1989 version of this song would have ended up here anyway. For the last few years, I've been making a point of watching a movie—usually a comedy—on my birthday. [This year, that movie was *Do The Right Thing*](#). Clicking that sentence will give you a little more context if you're curious. One thing I'll add here is I'd never actually seen the film before, but I knew there was a switch in tone at the end from comedy to tragedy somehow. I won't spoil the ending, but I had no clue it would be so similar to the summer of 2020. "Fight The Power" plays more than a dozen times in *Do The Right Thing*, and until I discovered some of the songs that follow on this mix album, it and Rage Against The Machine's "Killing in the Name" were the only musical expressions that seemed to capture the resilience and outrage of the protests to protect Black lives which became a regular occurrence after George Floyd's murder. But they are both 20 years old, and I ultimately decided to cut any track this year without a 2020 copyright. The many allusions appearing in the additional [lyrics](#) of the 2020 remix are like a breadcrumb trail leading to the history lessons folks like me needed to seek out over the summer to better understand how we might contribute to the change and healing necessary, as well as stand in solidarity.

"March March" by The Chicks - Ever since "Not Ready To Make Nice" and the *Shut Up and Sing* documentary that followed, Natalie Maines' voice has had a ripcord-like attachment to my heart. In anticipation of The Chicks' first new album in 14 years, my wife played the "Gaslighter," and "Julianna Calm Down" singles as loud as her little Echo Dot would go, as well as older, sadder

Chicks songs that sometimes had me trying to do dishes through my tears. "March March" intrigued me, but the first few times I heard it were muffled through the walls of our home. I was trying to hold out until the full *Gaslighter* LP came out. Then, one day, I decided to [watch the music video](#). Ripcord pulled!

"I Can't Breathe" by H.E.R. - I have no idea where I came across this song, but I'm so grateful for it. I was not familiar with Gabriella Sarmiento Wilson before, but H.E.R. cathartic single synthesized so much about the racial reckoning taking place. She does this both deftly and directly, anchored by the same refrain gasped by some [70 people](#) who have died over the last decade in police custody after saying those words—"I can't breathe."

"Another Night" by Possible Bird - My friend Sean (Possible Bird) first wrote and recorded this song 19 years ago. It appeared on the posthumous [STEVE EP, Unspoken](#). I was in the band STEVE with Sean and lent some backing vocals to this track--some of which survived to the new and improved version appearing on his self-titled 2020 [Possible Bird album](#). As this record was taking shape, I became more and more impressed with the songs in progress Sean was sharing with me. I was so taken with them, that I proposed a film project about the album and ended up taking a carload of gear to his home in South Dakota for a whirlwind weekend of [talking and filming](#). I arrived around 11 pm on a Friday, we filmed all day and evening on Saturday, and I was back home in Minnesota by 5 pm Sunday. You can see the "album trailer" I put together from that footage and download the full record @ [dreamingoutloudrecords.com](#). "Another Night" is a fragile, voice-and-guitar-driven ballad, but there's quite a range of sonic experimentation on the album--so much so there was only one song Sean could actually sit and perform for me on camera. That track, "Bloom," became the lead single, released on April 1, 2020 (Sean's 40th birthday!), and I edited more footage from my South Dakota trip into a music video you can watch [here](#). Of course, you can also listen to Possible Bird wherever you listen to music, and I recommend you do. That guitar hook on "December" has become an all-time favorite!

"Letter To You" by Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band - "Letter To You" is the title track of Springsteen's 20th studio album--his first with the E Street Band since 2014's *High Hopes*. It's also the namesake of longtime film collaborator Thom Zimny's accompanying documentary, which beautifully captures the magic of this legendary band's collaboration in black and white as they arrange and record the album over just five days in Springsteen's home studio. Both were released on October 23, and both are about life, death, and rock 'n' roll.

*In my letter to you
I took all my fears and doubts
In my letter to you
All the hard things I found out
In my letter to you
All that I've found true*

And I sent it in my letter to youThe Boss also regularly commandeered his own E Street Radio channel on SiriusXM to "play songs and share thoughts about the times we are living in" during the pandemic. ["From My Home To Yours"](#) is one of the silver linings of 2020. Some of the

standout episodes from this bi-weekly (now monthly) satellite radio show are Volume 5: American Skin, Volume 6: Down to the River to Pray, and Volume 14: Farewell to the Thief.

"Rock and Grohl - The EPIC Battle" by Nandi Bushell - In August, this 10-year-old British musician posted a tweet saying, "My dream is to one day jam with Dave Grohl [...] Mr Grohl I would love to have a drum battle with you!" My wife showed me [the tweet](#), which shows Nandi in Ipswich, England drumming along to "Everlong" with irrepressible glee and remarkable skill. The video is easily one of the most joyous and inspiring things I've ever seen on The Internet. It caught Grohl's attention, and the two drummers went back-and-forth for about four months until the Foo Fighters frontman ultimately conceded defeat. It is a rabbit hole worth the fall. Throughout, Grohl once again confirms his status as one of the great magnanimous ambassadors of Rock, and [Nandi Bushell](#) bashes and screams her way into the hearts of millions of music fans. "Rock and Grohl" is a very satisfying distillation of this soon-to-be-legendary rivalry. Playing all of the instruments and singing lines like "Rock and roll's my love / Rock and roll's my soul / Rock and Grohl will help me change the world" and a chant of "Stand up / be counted," I found it unexpectedly moving.

As you can see in [the homemade music video](#) co-created with "[her] Daddy," Nandi's gear is graffitied with the female gender symbol, the solidarity fist, "LOVE," and "RESPECT." Seeing this effervescent young lady rock-out while expressing so much distinctive creativity, joy, and even a sense of activism... I thought of this [edited] passage from author Ijeoma Oluo.

"As the newer generation casts us aside it is very easy to find yourself feeling old and . . . wrong. What happens when the youth roll their eyes at principles we've spent our lives fighting for, when they've decided that they are not only outdated, but oppressive? ... Our kids are fighting for a world more just and more righteous than we had ever dared to dream of. [Our] role as the adult generation in society [is] to help give them the platform they need to build their way on, or smash once they've decided it doesn't work for them."

If our future is in the hands of young people like Greta Thunberg, the students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School who organized the "March for Our Lives," Amanda Gorman, and Nandi Bushell, I feel there's much to be hopeful for.

"Underdog" by Alicia Keys - I used to avoid Alicia Keys whenever I could. Though her talent is undeniable, I found her affect and speaking voice irksome. I know... I know... I'm a dumbass. I knew it was foolish and wrongminded, but I never had any sufficient motivation to move beyond that shallow judgment. When an interview with this songstress from Hell's Kitchen popped up on [WTF \[podcast\] episode 1159](#), I decided to give her a fair shot. And, of course, she is delightful. I ended up buying her latest album *Alicia* on iTunes and fell in love with this song.

"Conscience Calls" by Zach & The Bright Lights - Zach was on the very [first mix album](#) I put together in this way back in 2004. At the time I was writing the songs that would become my first album, [Dog Days](#), and I was inspired by seeing him play at The Mustard Seed Cafe in Akron, Ohio. I looked to him as an example of where to try and get gigs and how to somehow engage with the music scene in Northeast Ohio. A few years later, [I produced a promotional video for him](#), and we became friends through music. We even co-wrote a tune called "[The Happiest Sad Song](#),"

which appears on my second record and his collection of collaborations, Provenance. He has always been very generous to me.

Originally recorded in a more laidback, stripped-down acoustic fashion for his 2016 *Voice In The Wilderness* album, this full, Bright Lights band rendition couldn't have come at a better time. Seeing Zach grin and groove his way through the song standing next to his van's side-mirror in [this lyric video](#) really lifts my spirit. And through the rancor and heartbreak that came to a head in 2020, this chorus is the mantra I didn't know I needed. "Give me the strength to love."

Like all too many folks, Zach had a very tragic 2020. He is the sort of person, though, who fights through the pain and refuses to have his heart hardened by it.

Back in 2007 when I interviewed him for the video profile, he said "I think inspiration is the best thing we can do for each other." Mission accomplished, my friend.

"Do or Die (edit)" by Ani DiFranco - This get-out-the-vote song also has [a great video](#). In it, the now 50-year-old "little folk singer" gets out of bed, shaves her head, masks up, rolls up her overalls, and gets down to some grassroots community organizing in New Orleans. Ani looks nearly the same newly-shorn as she did on the cover of her 1990 debut album, and she's still getting into "good trouble, necessary trouble." She's even doing a bit of choreographed dancing with the New Orleans Dance Collective.

"A Beautiful Noise" by Alicia Keys & Brandi Carlile - I recall my wife sharing this song with me via a text that read something like, "I think you might hate this, but I love it." Little did she know, I had already changed my tune about Alicia Keys! Even if I hadn't cleared those cobwebs yet, this duet would have still won my heart.

*No one's saying what we need to hear
I will not let silence win
When I see all the pain our people are in
There's no other choice*

'Cause I have a voice **"Winter Song (edit)" by Leslie Odom, Jr.** - Christmas started early in our house this year—the week before Thanksgiving! That little Echo Dot was working overtime playing holiday songs. Most of the mix was perennial classics, but there were some contemporary tunes, too. There seemed to be a whole lot of Kelly Clarkson popping up! During this song, something caught me, and I called out, "Alexa! Who is this?" When the Dot told me it was Leslie Odom, Jr. I thought to myself, "well, no wonder I dig this!" Like most folks, I became familiar with Odom as Aaron Burr in *Hamilton* singing the undeniable, "Wait for It." More recently, he comforted some 143 thousand Twitter users like me with [this November 2nd post](#) in which he sang his signature song in a different context.

"Winter Song" almost breaks my rule of including only releases from 2020 this year. The first half of the track is taken from Odom's 2016 *Simply Christmas*, but the remainder comes from his 2020 *Christmas Album* and features actress and singer Cynthia Erivo (who I'd fallen for as Holly Gibney in *The Outsider* miniseries this year).

Originally penned and recorded by Sara Bareilles & Ingrid Michaelson in 2009, the melancholy lyrics took on a new meaning during a holiday season hampered by the raging coronavirus and rancorous political divisions.

*This is my winter song.
December never felt so wrong,
'Cause you're not where you belong;
Inside my arms.
Is love alive?
Is love alive?
Is love alive?*