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Entertainment > Music

## Bay Area jazz cats gave us some memorable music in 2017



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Singer Andrea Claburn released an impressive debut, "Nightshade."

Thomas Claburn/Courtesy of Andrea Claburn



By **ANDREW GILBERT** | Correspondent  
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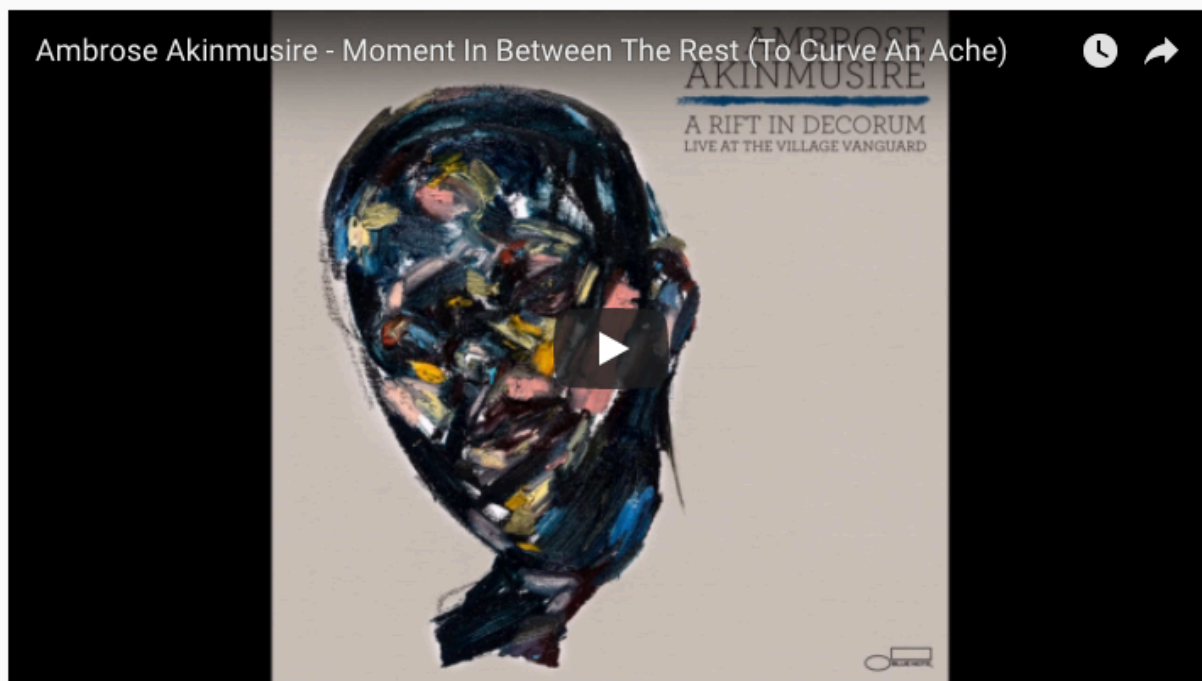
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I'll confess that I've sought refuge in music more in the past year than I have at any time since high school, a dimly remembered time when aural succor required placing a stylus on a large vinyl disc that rotated at 33 1/3 revolutions per minute.

So I'm particularly grateful to the artists who've released transporting music over the past 12 trying months. These are the 10 jazz albums by Bay Area-based artists that I returned to most frequently, in alphabetical order.

**Ambrose Akinmusire, "A Rift In Decorum" (Blue Note):** Ambrose Akinmusire leads his protean quartet through a kaleidoscopic array of material that often zigs just when you expect a zag. Recorded live at the Village Vanguard, the double album captures the Oakland-trumpeter with his longtime collaborators Sam Harris (piano), Harish Raghavan (bass) and fellow Berkeley High grad Justin Brown (drums) stretching out on a program of original tunes marked by brooding moods, bristling harmonies and disjunctive segues.



**Andrea Claburn, "Nightshade" (Lot 49 Labs):** San Francisco vocalist Andrea Claburn dropped one of the year's most impressive debuts with "Nighshade," a project that focuses on her finely wrought original songs and arrangements. Surrounded by a world-class cast of players, including pianist Matt Clark, bassist Sam Bevan, and drummer Alan Hall, she combines rhythmic acuity, prepossessing warmth and an intrepid spirit on material that would daunt many singers.



**Ben Goldberg School “Vol. 1: The Humanities” (BAG Productions):** Berkeley clarinetist Ben Goldberg maintains at least half a dozen ensembles of various sizes and he seems to save his most beatific and lyrical tunes for the talent-laden sextet, School. Featuring alto saxophonist Kasey Knudsen, trombonist Jeff Cressman, bassist David Ewell, drummer Hamir Atwal, and accordionist Rob Reich, the project focuses on Goldberg’s blues-and-roots steeped themes, providing an unfettered forum for some of the Bay Area’s most expressive improvisers.

**Benny Green, “Happiness!” (Sunnyside):** For sheer joyous swing, it’s hard to beat Berkeley pianist Benny Green at the helm of a sympathetic trio. Recorded live at Santa Cruz’s Kuumbwa Jazz Center, this aptly named album documents Green in ecstatic communion with bassist David Wong and drummer Rodney Green (no relation), rip-snorting through the pianist’s coruscating tunes.

**“Erik Jekabson Quintet,” (Wide Hive):** Over the last couple of years El Cerrito trumpeter Erik Jekabson has focused a good deal of his bandleading energy on the Electric Squeezebox Orchestra, but he’s just as resourceful in a small combo. Playing with blue-flame intensity, he combines ubiquitous rhythm section masters John Wiitala (bass) and Hamir Atwal (drums) with stellar but too-little-heard players Dave Mac Nab (guitar) and Dave Ellis (tenor and soprano saxophones) on a program of insistently simmering originals.



**Lisa Mezzacappa, “avant-NOIR” (Clean Feed):** A commanding improviser and composer with an ear for arresting textures, San Francisco bassist Lisa Mezzacappa found inspiration in the crime fiction of Dashiell Hammett and Paul Aster for this vividly cinematic suite. The music is laden with deceptive feints, cryptic clues, leering pauses, misleading MacGuffins and sound effects created by percussion master William Winant and electronics wizard Tim Perkis. Mezzacappa regulars Aaron Bennett (saxophones), John Finkbeiner (electric guitar) and Jordan Glenn (drums) keep the hard-boiled music on the hunt, traipsing through the fog shrouded alleys and dangerous dives.

**Negative Press Project, “Eternal Life: Jeff Buckley Songs and Sounds” (Ridgeway Music):** co-led by bassist Andrew Lion and pianist Ruthie Dineen, the East Bay electro-acoustic ensemble performs a remarkable creative feat, transforming Buckley’s classic debut album into sumptuously detailed instrumental arrangements. Reverent but unintimidated, their sound is a seamless blend of chamber jazz, rock and instrumental pop. Essentially an album and a half, the package also includes a four-song EP with vocals by Jeff Campbell, Mia Pixley and Jeff Denson (who co-produced the project).



**Evan Price, “Dialogues” (Azica Records):** After a decade in Turtle Island Quartet and an ongoing two-decade tenure in the Hot Club of San Francisco, violinist Evan Price finally released his first album under his own name, and it was well worth the wait. Engaging in a stylistically diverse series of duo encounters, he interprets Bach’s “Partita No. 2 for Violin and Bass” with Paul Keller, improvises pieces with guitarist Jason Vieaux, and cuts loose on Celtic fiddle tunes with Jeremy Kittel.

**San Francisco String Trio, “May I Introduce to You” (Ridgeway Records):** Three of the Bay Area’s finest improvisers make a compelling case for jazz Beatlemania with an album celebrating the 50th birthday of “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.” Featuring Jeff Denson on bass and vocals, guitarist Mimi Fox, and violinist Mads Tolling, the SFST reimagines each tune in a way that stands by itself while also revealing something new about the original.

