

## Eighth Blackbird

Sleeping Giant is a collective of six thirtysomething US composers. They met while students at Yale University, and share an attitude to writing music that puts vitality and diversity before any rigid aesthetic. Two of the six, Timo Andres and Andrew Norman, may be reasonably well known on this side of the Atlantic, but the other four – Robert Honstein, Christopher Cerrone, Ted Hearne and Jacob Cooper – will be much less familiar.

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For the Hand Eye album, the collective was commissioned to compose a suite for the six-piece ensemble of Eighth Blackbird; each of their contributions was to be inspired by an artwork in the collection of the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art in Michigan. For some, the artwork suggested an aural image from which their own music could take its course; others attempted to reflect ideas within the artworks in their pieces. For Andres, for example, the abstract monochrome pen-and-ink works of Astrid Bowlby prompted the textures of his Checkered Shade, a mosaic of repeating patterns that eventually merges into a comforting chorale, while the starting point for the three brief movements of Norman's Mine, Mime, Meme was an installation by Random International, in which a system of mirrors responds to the movements of anyone who views it.

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What is most striking about the suite, apart from the brilliance and immediacy of Eighth Blackbird's performances, is the lack of sameness in the individual pieces. Though minimalism – Reich and Adams more than Glass – seems to be a common starting point for all six composers, and they move unselfconsciously between purely diatonic and much more complex, heavily chromatic textures, their musical personalities seem markedly different and sharply contrasted. Some of the music, such as Cerrone's South Catalina, is bright, shiny, outgoing; other pieces, such as Hearne's By-By Huey, are darker and more conflicted. As a snapshot of what one group among the younger generation of US composers is doing, it's encouraging and revealing.

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## Sinikka Langeland

Here is another beautiful set from the Norwegian folk singer and Finnish-harp specialist Sinikka Langeland. It's comparable to 2015's [The Half-Finished Heaven](#) in its balance of jazz suppleness (her Starflowers group is a star-packed contemporary jazz band) and poetic lyricism steered by a fascination with the natural world. But it's also augmented by the hymnal harmonies of vocalists [Trio Mediaeval](#).

Themed around the ancient heaven-meets-earth concept of the axis mundi, it's a stream of entrancing sound in which long, ringing harp tones drift across vocal laments and thudding low drumbeats. Trygve Seim's shy sax interjections cross restrained bass and drums grooves, and Arve Henriksen unfolds slow motifs with a stately hipness reminiscent, on the rhythmically floating [Jacob's Dream](#), of the Miles Davis [Sketches of Spain](#) classic [Solea](#).

Langeland is sometimes crisply talkative, sometimes ethereally lost in a dream, and Henriksen's vaporous dialogue with her on the gliding [Karsikko](#) is gently dazzling. It's a folk album, sung in Langeland's Finnskogen dialect, but so open to jazz conversations that its audience stretches far wider.

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## Rag'n'Bone Man

Sussex hip-hop bluesman Rag'n'Bone Man has been named the Brits critics choice winner for 2017. The award is often seen as a guarantee of future success, having previously been won by the likes of Adele, Florence + the Machine, Sam Smith and James Bay, among others – though the 2016 winner, Jack Garratt, underachieved by those standards.

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Unsurprisingly, the singer pronounced himself pleased with the award. "I thought they had made a mistake. I was up against two pop giants. It's bloody brilliant! I'm crazy happy. Proper massive grin."

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What's unusual about Rag'n'Bone Man – real name Rory Graham – is that he's hardly the ingenue new talent awards normally celebrate. Now 31, he has been making music in one form or another since his teens, and became a full-time musician after signing a publishing deal with Warner Chappell in 2013. Though billed as an EP, his 2014 release *Wolves* is long enough – just short of half an hour – to count as an album, and after it was rereleased following his signing to Sony, it grazed the charts in several European countries.

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In summer 2016, he released the single *Human*, co-written with Jamie Hartman, which became a major hit across Europe, topping the charts in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia and Switzerland and reaching No 11 in the UK. His debut album, also called *Human*, follows in February 2017.

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He is a winning and unusual live performer, too – sometimes appearing with the rapper Stig of the Dump, with whom he combines on a modernised version of the standard *House of the Rising Sun*. He will be appearing on Jools Holland's annual Hootenanny on BBC2 on new year's eve.

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Rag'n'Bone man defeated pop acts *Dua Lipa* and *Anne-Marie* to win the award. His style is unusual, in that it combines modern production with what sounds like the voice of a weathered blues singer from the deep south. The addition of Hartman as a co-writer, however, shows his move to Sony is moving him away from the more underground scene he used to be part of, and towards the mainstream. Hartman, who had chart success with the group *Ben's Brother*, is also an award-winning songwriter for others, contributing work to *Kylie Minogue*, *Birdy*, *James Bay* and *Anastacia* among many others.

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## Ray BLK

Long before the winners were announced for the big tip lists for 2017, there was a sense that something had to change. Over the last few years, the Brits critics' choice award has served up a procession of none-more-bland solo stars (Jack Garratt, James Bay, Tom Odell) while the BBC's Sound of poll was becoming equally tiring (Years & Years, Sam Smith). These artists would sell by the bucket-load, of that there was no doubt, but were they really representative of the diversity and energy of modern UK pop? There was talk of voting panel shake-ups, but in the case of the Brits it doesn't seem to have quite worked out – this year's critics' choice winner is Rag'n'Bone Man, a white soul singer whose deep delta blues voice jars somewhat with the fact he's from East Sussex.

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The BBC's Music Sound of 2017 winner, however, seems to be a break with such predictability. Rag'n'Bone Man's seeming coronation was blocked by 22-year-old Ray BLK, a singer from south London whose voice couldn't be more authentic: she sings about chicken shops and "caffs not a cafe" on the streets of Lewisham, teenage pregnancies and benefits. Her rasping soul voice has been compared to that of Lauryn Hill – and she shares Hill's fondness for reminiscing about youthful golden days. But you can also hear the likes of Amy Winehouse in BLK's music – the London slang, the cheeky wit, the ability to nab US soul influences without being subsumed by them.

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Like many of those on this year's list, BLK is adept at merging street credibility with pop nous. Her 2016 mini-album, Durt, smooths over most rough edges with melody; the fact 5050 steals the chorus line from the Cardigans' Lovefool seems ample evidence that this is not challenging music. But we are a world away from the Brit school production line here – Durt features guest spots from Stormzy and Wretch 32, and grime's sparse production style is evident in places. She grew up with no formal musical background, instead learning the trade from MTV Base and the music of Missy Elliott and Notorious BIG. Unsurprisingly, given those influences, personality is key in BLK's music, the sense that the music is about a person's life rather than just a vehicle for a palatable voice – Baby Girlz paints a scene where "baby girl's got a baby girl" and "baby's boy don't give a fuck"; the ambivalent hometown portrait My Hood talks about gangsters and concrete flowers, yet you leave fully aware of the pride she takes in where she's from.

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Ray BLK might have won the BBC Music Sound of 2017, but happily she was no anomaly on the longlist. The typically milquetoast entrants (Maggie Smith, the Japanese House) were more than outnumbered by Stefflon Don, AJ Tracey, Anderson .Paak, Nadia Rose and Dave. Even Cabbage, one of the few indie choices on the list, are a chaotic bunch of scruffs who recently caused a stir by blasting the Sun for picking them as one of their tips for 2017. Of

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course, UK pop music has been in a healthy state for some time, and nobody should need an industry list to tell them that. But with the inevitable exposure and opportunities such awards bring, it's reassuring to know that the tipping industry is finally catching up with the times.

