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New Wave Of Neo-Soul Artists Are Innovating

less conventional themes and textures

and making some of the most inven-

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Call it R&B, soul, "urban" — the music associated with supple rhythms and emotive, gospel-influenced vocals is a permanent fixture in the upper regions of the pop charts. Last year, R&B artists sold nearly 50 million albums and 250 million digital tracks, outdone only by rock and pop music. The sound is omnivorous and influential as it continues to infiltrate dance music and hip-hop, while superstars such as Rihanna and Justin Timberlake regularly incorporate it into their music. Even introspective indie rockers such as Arcade Fire have embraced its pulse.

R&B music lately has become synonymous on the mainstream charts with a certain rhythmic and vocal abandon — a platform for emoting and celebrating, a soundtrack for

partying and hustling. But it also has a dark and twisted side, and a new wave of neo-soul artists has established its identity by exploring less con-

ventional themes and textures and making some of the most inventive records of the era in any genre.

In 2010, the Atlanta-based artist Janelle Monae created an android alter-ego in her song cycle "The ArchAndroid"; a few weeks ago, she released an even more ambitious follow-up, "The Electric Lady," as part of the multi-part concept. In 2012, Frank Ocean, a member of the Odd Future hip-hop collective, tuned into "Channel Orange" and the toxic lifestyle of his adopted home in California; mourning a breakup with another man in the song "Bad Religion," he worked the di-vide between secular and sacred that has informed soul albums since Ray Charles emerged in the 1950s.

Last year also saw the emergence of Miguel, an R&B singer who is opening for Drake in one of the fall's biggest arena tours. Miguel's 2012 release, "Kaleidoscope Dream," flirted with so many styles of music that it didn't neatly fit the definition of mainstream R&B, yet it was a hit anyway, debuting at No. 3 on the pop charts and selling hundreds of thousands of copies.

"I definitely think it's an R&B record, though other people may not," Miguel said at the time. "They are so conditioned to expect certain things out of current R&B, and it's about following a formula. But R&B was once live music, it was psychedelic, it was rock, it was funk, and all these genres stem from soul music. You never would have had Funkadelic or (Jimi) Hendrix or Hall and Oates or the Bee Gees or the Brothers Johnson had it not been for soul and R&B. There would be no hip-hop or rock without R&B. It was important for me to be true to what R&B is, and that is soulful."

Last month, the Weeknd's "Kiss Land" debuted at No. 2 with 96,000 sales despite its stark subject matter. The Weeknd — a pseudonym for Éthiopian-Canadian singer Abel Tesfaye — made an instant impact in 2011 with

three self-released mix tapes that cast him as a deeply troubled seducer. The mix-tapes were downloaded 8 million times and led to a major-label deal. In "Kiss Land," the R&B slow jams typically associated with sex and seduction are transformed into background music for deeply jaded romantics. They are recovering from hangovers or so narcotized that they can barely function. There's a mean streak in many of the Weeknd's songs as unfiltered emotions rise to the surface. Narrators talk to their lovers with a mixture of malice and desire, and it's chilling.

The music doesn't hew to convention either. If Miguel is about exploring a mish-mash of traditional but recognizable styles, the Weeknd verges on the avant-garde. Notes reverberate and then collapse into empty space. The title song suggests a nightmarish circus with screams rising from the background.

Even from such an extreme vantage point, it's possible to ... a new wave of neo-soul artists has draw a line back to R&B tradiestablished its identity by exploring tion, particu-

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tive records of the era in any genre. "Here, My Dear," documented his crumbled marriage to Anna Gordy as part of their divorce settlement. The lacerating album brims with some of the most beautifully recorded poison ever made, with Gaye pouring out his heartache and bitterness

over lush orchestrations. Other revered voices from the past — the serene U.K. chanteuse Sade, the quiet-storm era Smokey Robinson — inform the new neosoul. Rhye's "Woman" has the deceptively relaxed glow of a classic Sade album, right down to the way that Canadian singer Mike Milosh's voice approximates Sade's sultry tone. "Woman" isn't nearly as caustic as the

Weeknd's "Kiss Land," but it is just as successful in creating its own intimate space, one that sounds far removed from the more strident production values of most mainstream R&B. R&B celebrity-star Beyonce has flirted with

less-conventional styles of music on her recent albums, but it's her sister, Solange Knowles, who's the most adventurous artist in the family. On her 2012 EP, "True," she taps into new wave with corrosive lyrics in collaboration with British producer Dev Hynes. Yet at the Pitchfork Music Festival in Chicago this summer, she brought her claustrophobic music back to R&B's roots. Improbably, she turned the midtempo crash-and-burn ode "Losing You" into a lightly skipping dance tune with a six-piece band. With orange and yellow beachballs bouncing festively around the audience, the new neo-soul became, in Knowles' words, an "old-school grind fest.

It was another indication of how R&B manages to stay fresh. Even as it struts high atop the charts arm-in-arm with hip-hop and electronic dance music, a new wave of artists is busy reinventing its possibilities in the shad-

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