

Black Excellence Was in Top Form

Because art > real life, sometimes.

By Chanel Parks



That's Golden Globe Nominee Issa Rae to you. Photograph courtesy of Getty Images

It's not exactly unsung that black culture provided the silver lining to the year. When you see Issa Rae nominated for a Golden Globe only weeks after her first season finale, or when the Knowles sisters make history as top record-selling siblings, it's hard to say that the creative efforts of black people went unnoticed in 2016.



Remember that time Frank Ocean took his mom as a date to the White House State Dinner? (And he wore Vans.) Photograph courtesy of Getty Images

And yet, in the final stride of Obama's America, there is still the horror of a racial divide in which innocent black men die at the hands of—predominantly white—cops. Even our First Lady was a target, when she was called an “ape in heels” by government officials in West Virginia, and again when her powerful words were plagiarized by the incoming First Lady.

But as the very real erasure and hatred of black people progressed, great film, music, television, and literature emerged to remind us that the monolithic assumptions about race were myths that needed to be dispelled.

So, no, black entertainment wasn't the unsung hero of 2016—but let's take a look at the heroes who, together, accomplished something much bigger than they could have done alone.

The Gay Black Man, Part I



“Hand me a towel, I’m dirty dancing” to “Blonde.”

Frank Ocean blew everyone's minds with *Blonde* (Blond?), an album that focused on the prospects and consequences of love, lust, and loneliness. The deeply confessional and harshly honest record gave listeners a deeper glimpse into Ocean himself while also providing anthemic tracks that a surprisingly broad swath of people could identify with. Oh, and the imaginative lyrics (“it’s hell on earth and the city’s on fire”) and blatant statements (“I ain’t makin’ minimum wage, mama”) work as harmoniously together as do the diverse voices and personalities woven throughout the album.

The Gay Black Man, Part II



If you haven't seen "Moonlight," you might want to take care of that real soon.

One of the best movies of 2016 (or maybe ever) was *Moonlight*, and it startled me in the best way possible. Director Barry Jenkins and the cast showcased the torment, both quiet and loud, of a gay child, teen, and man in an extremely heteronormative community—and transformed our views of what a suffering queer person is supposed to look and act like. One of the year's most disruptive and perfect moments was the pivotal scene in which Chiron and Kevin engage in a weirdly flirtatious and captivating exchange that makes you feel every single emotion they're feeling. That's movie magic right there.

The Public and Private Activist

What's not to love about Solange's *A Seat at the Table*? She captures the emotions of what it's like to be black in America, in both private and public ways. She explains that black people constantly have to protect themselves in society, but they also have to practice self-care and self-celebration. To me, she's proving that a person can be a powerful force without constantly having to maintain a hard shell. So yes, we "got a lot to be mad about" while we should "fall in [our] ways so [we] won't crumble" under ignorance and overwhelming prejudice.

The Real AF Friend Group



This one's for the BFFs 4 Ever.

We've seen a lot of shows about *friends*, but it's refreshing to see a group of women like the one in HBO's *Insecure*. They confront workplace drama, uncomfortable relationships, elitism, and blackness in ways that are as humorous as they are serious and realistic. And any time you can call your friend a "bitch" without repercussions, you know you're in it for the long haul with your bestie.

The Mathematical Geniuses



Do you know about the three women who changed NASA forever?

The women of *Hidden Figures*—NASA mathematicians and scientists Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Katherine G. Johnson—really were, and still mostly are, hidden. Despite having been a powerful force behind John Glenn's space adventures—and much of the agency's other work in the '60s—not many of us had even heard of them before this film. The real-life story of their work is astonishing, not just for what they accomplished but for its larger, mostly unsung truth: smart black women walk the earth every single day.

The Weird Kid



Chance the Rapper had arguably one of the best years ever.

Let it be noted that “weird” here isn’t derogatory, as Chance the Rapper is delightfully weird in his intelligence and creativity. The no-label-having, Chi-Town native exquisitely blends together Christian values with weed-smoking banter, love with hate, and rap with various musical themes in jazz, gospel, and electronica—which makes him one of the most original voices of 2016.

The Lost Women



Contender for novel of the year? Yes.

Author Zadie Smith introduced one of fiction’s realest friendships in her latest novel, *Swing Time*. The unnamed narrator recounts her longtime friendship with a girl named Tracy, one anchored in their shared experience as children of mixed-race backgrounds. Instead of filling the book with butterfly feelings and happy endings, Smith captures the true messiness of human

interaction with its harshness and failed trajectories. For me, it redefined the idea of what friendships ultimately mean and how they, unfortunately, don't always go as planned.

The Pseudo-Existentialist



Kilo Kish's album cover, but also the expression we all had throughout 2016.

I wish Kilo Kish's album, *Reflections in Real Time*, was talked about more. The singer's debut full-length is a commentary on the confusion of deciphering social cues in the modern world, and the woes and wonders of Snapchat, dating, and more. It's an all-too-real exploration of the plight of being a 20-something black woman in a world that hasn't quite figured you out yet.

The Ivy Dropout



Earn, Darius, and Paper Boi: the Three Musketeers of "Atlanta."

Donald Glover's *Atlanta* breaks down a few assumptions. For one, a big-name school like Princeton can't always save you. Also, a show doesn't need intense theatrics and overwhelming archetypes to be wildly good. Glover's character, Earn, is the obvious subject of study throughout the episodes, but the surrounding characters—Paper Boi, Darius, and Van—build up

an authentic ATL narrative that goes against the mainstream's stereotyped version of the southern city.

The Emotional Wife



Beyoncé looking happy with a bat in her hand. Casual.

Once you get over the fact that someone cheated on Beyoncé, come back to your center and listen to the wide range of emotions she showcases throughout *Lemonade*. Visual components aside, Beyoncé goes beyond the typical jilted-wife trope and creates a new guide to grieving. There's, of course, anger and sadness, but Queen B relishes in a vulnerability that even the strongest of women endure during heartbreak. The best part of all, though, is that there is no bounce back to normalcy: in the second-to-last track, *All Night*, Bey knows she will stay with the love her life, but she also knows she won't forget the fact that someone screwed up, and that's something she won't let down that easy. That bat will always have a place in her closet, if you catch my drift.