

CREDIT INSIGHTS: JANUARY 2023

# Credit Markets Rebound in Risk-On Rally

## Performance Overview

A risk-on rally underpinned a strong start to the year as performance returned to positive territory across global credit markets after last year’s negative returns. Yields and spreads compressed amid signs that inflation has peaked and a perceived decline in recession risk.

Investment grade outperformed the rest of credit in January and lower-rated assets led the non-investment grade rally in a reversal of last year’s dominant theme.

The Fed and ECB raised rates by the expected 25bp and 50bp respectively, in early February.<sup>1</sup> Both central banks reiterated the need for additional increases in the face of labor market resilience, although the Fed’s more dovish rhetoric about inflation pressures and decision to slow the pace of hikes contrasted with a more hawkish ECB stance.<sup>2</sup>

Equities outperformed all other markets, ending the month up over 6%. Despite some volatility, treasury yields compressed overall, leaving the 10Y 36bp tighter at 3.51% and the 2Y 22bp tighter at 4.21% at month end.<sup>3</sup>

In Europe, energy tail risk dissipated due to the milder winter and high gas storage levels. The more bullish outlook bolstered the Euro, as well as debt and equity markets, and pushed the iTraxx Crossover Index, a gauge of risk, to its tightest level in nine months.<sup>4</sup>

- **Technicals, hopes for Fed pivot fuel credit rebound**
- **CCCs lead markets higher in reversal of 2022 quality dispersion theme**
- **Central banks tighten inflation screws with more hikes**
- **Defaults rise after clean run through Q422**

A supportive technical was also at play with the seasonal January effect in full force. Primary issuance ticked up across loans, high yield and CLOs, but demand proved even stronger. Inflows into high yield funds resumed early in the month adding to cash balances, while demand from CLO buyers, moderating retail outflows and a pick-up in repayments supported loan prices.<sup>5</sup>

Last-twelve-month default rates for US HY and loans increased to 1.83% and 1.82%, respectively.<sup>6</sup> January’s five defaults totaling \$5.4 billion follow zero defaults in 4Q22 and are the most since October 2020.<sup>7</sup> In Europe, JP Morgan reduced its 2023 default rate forecast to 2% from 3%, while keeping its 2024 forecast at 2.5%.<sup>8</sup>

## Market Stats (as of January 31, 2023)<sup>9</sup>

	January	QTD	YTD
Morningstar LSTA US Leveraged Loan Index	2.73%	2.73%	2.73%
Bloomberg U.S. Corporate Investment Grade Index	4.01%	4.01%	4.01%
Bloomberg U.S. High Yield Index	3.81%	3.81%	3.81%
Credit Suisse Western European Leveraged Loan Index	2.73%	2.73%	2.73%
Credit Suisse Western European High Yield Index	3.14%	3.14%	3.14%
S&P500	6.28%	6.28%	6.28%
Euro Stoxx 50	9.94%	9.94%	9.94%

	Spread			Yield			Price		
	Level	ΔMTD	ΔYTD	Level	ΔMTD	ΔYTD	Level	ΔMTD	ΔYTD
US Loans	508	(51)	(51)	9.87%	-0.12%	-0.12%	\$ 94.23	\$ 1.79	\$ 1.79
US HY	438	(51)	(51)	8.14%	-0.85%	-0.85%	\$ 89.28	\$ 3.06	\$ 3.06
EU Loans	581	(80)	(80)	7.04%	0.22%	0.22%	€ 93.61	€ 2.05	€ 2.05
EUHY	488	(49)	(49)	7.61%	-0.68%	-0.68%	€ 88.58	€ 2.37	€ 2.37

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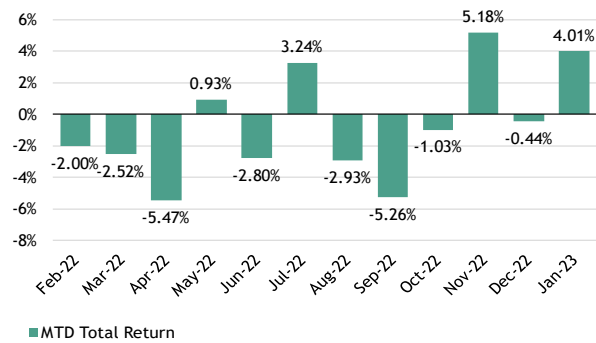
## US Investment Grade Market

Investment grade outperformed other credit markets in January amid the rate move and lower-than-expected supply. Performance rounded out the month at 4.01%, although late month volatility reduced this from a high of 4.45% mid-month.<sup>10</sup> Yields and spreads tightened to 4.96% and 117bp, levels last seen in April 2022, vs. year-end levels of 5.42% and 130bp.<sup>11</sup>

At \$140 billion January supply was the second busiest on record. Demand was stronger leading to oversubscriptions and a drop in new issue concessions to under 2bp.<sup>12 13</sup> US investment grade funds gained inflows of over \$10 billion with demand especially visible at the 30-year end of the curve.<sup>14</sup>

By rating, longer-dated Crossover and BBBs outperformed higher-rated, but shorter-dated single and double-As. By sector, Media, Cable and Energy, Oil outperformed.<sup>15</sup>

### IG Performance Moves Back into Positive Territory<sup>16</sup>



## US Loan and High Yield Markets

Strong technicals enabled US high yield and loans to record their strongest January performance since 2019 and 2009, at 2.73% and 3.81% respectively.<sup>17 18</sup>

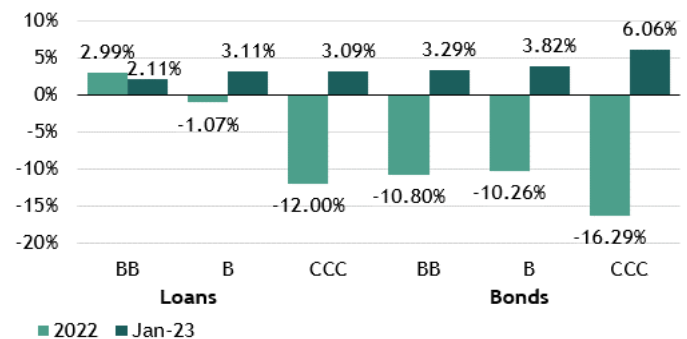
High yield spreads and yields compressed by 66bps and 85bp over the month,<sup>19</sup> while in loans, 54% of the index was quoted above \$98 at month-end.<sup>20</sup> Lower-rated assets outperformed in both markets.<sup>21 22</sup>

Refinancings dominated primary issuance in high yield while amend and extends dominated in loans as banks addressed some of last year's supply overhang. Strong demand for the few new LBO financings enabled tight pricing and a strong secondary performance.

Downgrades increased in January and 14.4% of the loan index is now rated B3 or lower, a high since November 2021.<sup>23</sup>

That said, rising prices reduced the distressed universe of bonds and loans to 7.9% of leveraged credit outstanding in January.<sup>29</sup>

### Single-B Loans, CCC HY Outperform in January<sup>30</sup>



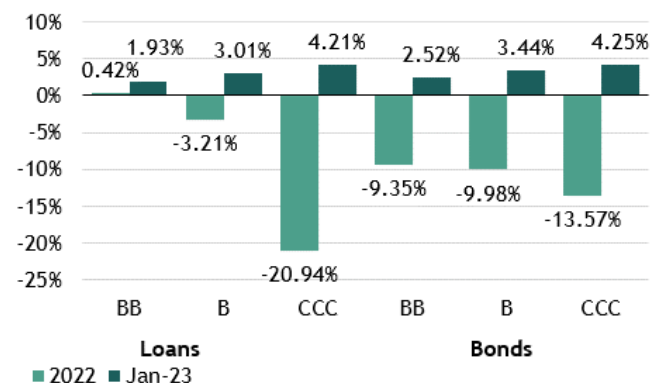
## European Loan and High Yield Markets

European loan performance improved through January to end at 2.73%, underpinned by a strengthening CLO bid and amid limited new money primary supply.<sup>24</sup>

Technicals and the rate rally ensured a robust performance for high yield, which posted a 3.14% return for January.<sup>25</sup> High cash balances and retail fund inflows supported demand for secondary bonds.<sup>26</sup>

Prices across lower-rated credits rose in both markets providing managers an opportunity to reduce portfolio beta. In primary, high yield recorded its strongest issuance month in a year.<sup>27</sup> Loan supply was slower and focused on maturity extension exercises. Improving macroeconomic data caused some research analysts to revise spread forecasts lower,<sup>28</sup> although there is ongoing vigilance over the potential for slower growth and higher rates to impact corporate performance later in the year.

### Lower-rated European Loan/HY Assets Lead Rally Higher<sup>31</sup>



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## US and European CLO Markets

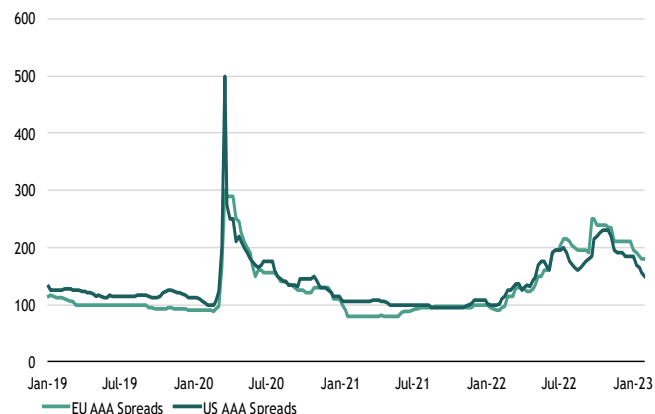
In January, the CLOIE index returned +1.63% and lower-rated tranches outperformed higher-rated tranches, mirroring the trend across other asset classes.<sup>32</sup>

Primary and secondary spreads in both regions have compressed significantly. US/European secondary CLO AAAs are now at 150/180bp (from 185/210bp respectively in December).<sup>33</sup> The up-in-quality theme has translated to price tiering between Tier 1 vs. other managers.

Supply started stronger than expected as managers took advantage of tighter liability spreads and renewed demand from accounts with fresh budgets to clear warehouses.<sup>34</sup> Global issuance is running 55% ahead of the same time last year.<sup>35</sup> Still, the limited availability of new assets and run up in secondary loan prices could drag on new CLO creation going forward.

Loan downgrades outnumbered upgrades in US BSL CLOs for a ninth consecutive month in January.<sup>36</sup> The share of CCCs for US CLOs in reinvestment period rose to 6% in January, up 2 points over the past 6 months. The default rate within US CLOs also increased but at a lesser rate and to a considerably lower level of 0.4%.<sup>37</sup>

## Secondary CLO AAA Spreads Compress in US, Europe as Demand Returns<sup>38</sup>



## Market Outlook: Proceed with Caution?

January's seasonal rally has extended into February as demand continues to outstrip supply, and as hopes that rates are close to peaking sustains the risk-on sentiment.

Absent a marked change in the technical environment, or a macroeconomic/geopolitical shock, it may be the Fed pivot narrative that directs markets over the near-term. Having barely flinched at the latest round of rate hikes and tech earnings misses at the start of February, bonds and stocks sold off as strong US jobs data revived concerns that the Fed may keep rates higher-for-longer. The view from our Investment Strategy team is that a Fed pivot is unlikely this year given the significant tightness in the labor market.<sup>39</sup>

Still, the yield and spread compression across loans and bonds in 2023 has been impressive, and the more optimistic outlook that has accompanied the rebound in performance<sup>40</sup> makes a welcome break from last year's pessimism.

The improved sentiment has also thawed primary markets. Banks have progressed in whittling down last year's overhang, while corporate issuers continue to push out maturities on existing debt. Robust demand for the small number of new money deals that have passed through the market (evidenced by oversubscriptions, reverse-flexes and strong secondary market performance) may encourage banks considering new buyout underwrites in the syndicated debt markets. In the meantime, we expect sponsors to continue to rely on the private credit market to do the heavy LBO lifting.<sup>41</sup>

## Margin Squeeze

Lower credit spreads point to potentially reduced default expectations, at least for now. Flat corporate profits<sup>42</sup> and strong labor markets may allow any global slowdown to be mild and less immediate.<sup>43</sup>

Recession risk hasn't disappeared, however, and slower growth combined with higher rates and consumer headwinds are expected to squeeze corporate margins and lead to a deterioration in credit fundamentals as the year progresses. En vogue lower-quality credits with smaller financial cushions are likely to be the first to get into trouble during a prolonged period of tighter monetary policy,<sup>44</sup> and in our view rising credit stress could leave spreads vulnerable to renewed widening. Rather than take on more risk the recent outperformance of lower-rated assets in our view has provided the opportunity to de-risk into strength.

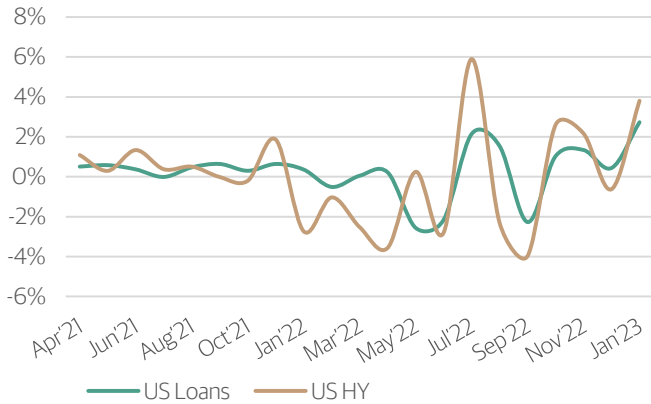
We believe our ability to provide flexible capital combined with active portfolio management will be crucial in an environment with increasing performance dispersion. We will maintain our bias for higher-quality assets, while selectivity will guide our thematic investment strategy in the months ahead.

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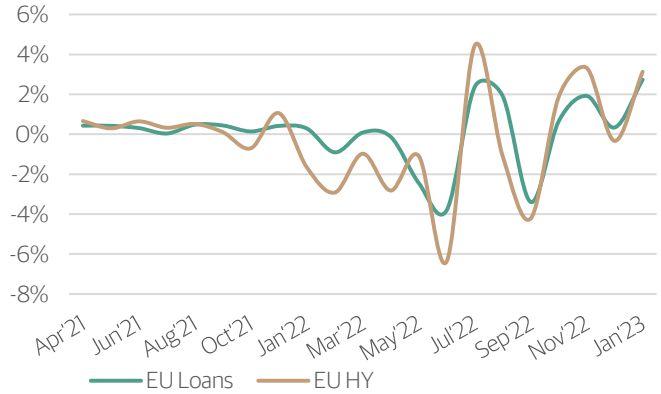
# Market Snapshot

(As of January 31, 2023)<sup>45</sup>

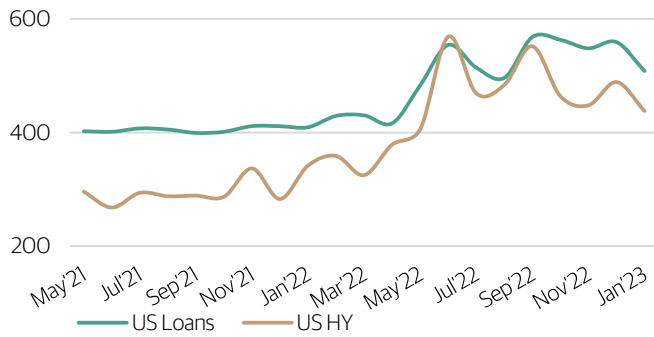
## US Credit Monthly Return



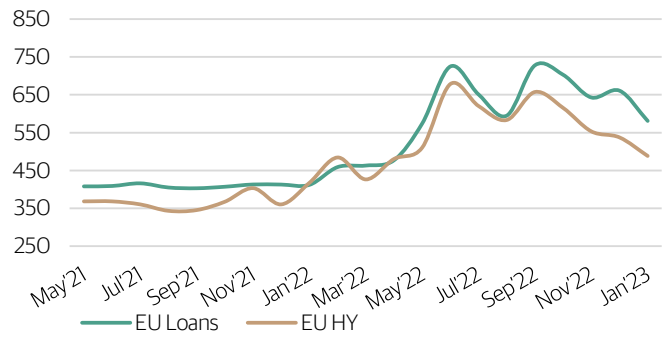
## EU Credit Monthly Return



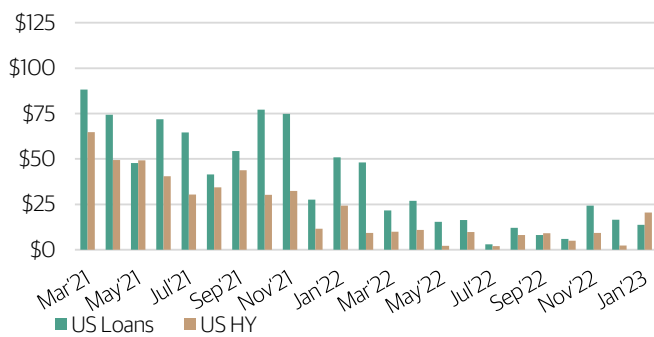
## US Credit Spreads (in bp)



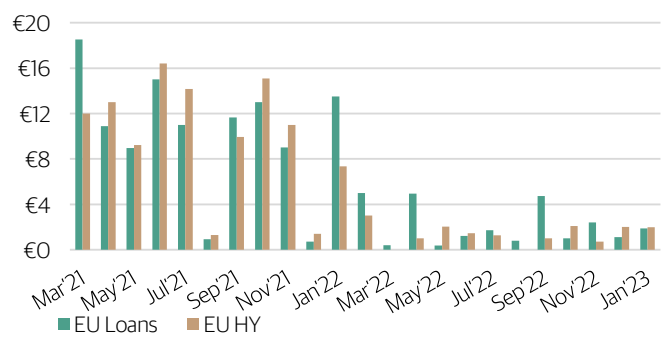
## EU Credit Spreads (in bp)



## US Credit Issuance (\$ in billions)



## EU Credit Issuance (€ in billions)



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bloomberg, February 1, 2, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Bloomberg News, Fed Slows Rate Hikes Even as Powell Says There's More Work to Do, February 1, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Bloomberg, January 31, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Bloomberg, January 31, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> JP Morgan Research, Lipper, as of January 11, 2023. (HY Inflows increased to \$2.3B for the week ended January 10, 2023)

<sup>6</sup> JP Morgan Default Monitor, February 1, 2023. (Includes distressed exchanges.)

<sup>7</sup> JP Morgan Default Monitor, February 1, 2023. (Includes distressed exchanges.)

<sup>8</sup> JP Morgan, High Yield Talking Points, February 7, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> The volatility and risk profile of the indices presented is likely to be materially different from that of a Fund. In addition, the indices employ different investment guidelines and criteria than a Fund and do not employ leverage; as a result, the holdings in a Fund and the liquidity of such holdings may differ significantly from the securities that comprise the indices. Loan YTM (Forward Libor/SOFR) reflects spread to maturity (S&P/LCD) plus 3-year swap to 3-month USD Libor/SOFR (Bloomberg).

<sup>10</sup> Bloomberg US Corporate Index, January 31, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Bloomberg US Corporate Index, December 30, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> CS Credit Strategy Daily, February 3, 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Blackstone Credit Systematic Strategy, January 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Blackstone Credit Trading Desk, January 31, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Barclays Credit Research, US Investment Grade Corporate Update, January 2023, February 1, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Bloomberg US BBB and BB Corporate Index, January 31, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> JPM High-Yield and Leveraged Loan Morning Intelligence, as of January 11, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Pitchbook LCD, January Wrap: Leveraged loans jump 2.73% in strongest start to year since 2009, February 1, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Bloomberg US High Yield Index, January 31, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Pitchbook LCD, January Wrap: Leveraged loans jump 2.73% in strongest start to year since 2009, February 1, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> JPM High-Yield and Leveraged Loan Morning Intelligence, as of January 11, 2023. (CCCs (+3.36%) outperform Single B rated bonds (+2.78%) and BB bonds (+2.49%.)

<sup>22</sup> Morningstar LSTA Leveraged Loan Index (US Loans), Bloomberg High Yield Bond Index, January 31, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> JPM High-Yield and Leveraged Loan Morning Intelligence, February 1, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Credit Suisse WELLI, December 31, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Bloomberg US High Yield Index, January 31, 2023.

<sup>26</sup> JP Morgan, Lipper, January 31, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Pitchbook LCD, LCD European Monthly Playbook, February 1, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> JP Morgan, European Credit Weekly, Eroding the European Premium, as of January 6, 2023. Also DB, Pitchbook LCD Daily Wrap, January 30, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> JP Morgan Distressed Universe (i.e., bonds trading 1000bp+ and loans sub-\$80) TJTJT

<sup>30</sup> Morningstar LSTA Leveraged Loan Index (US Loans), Bloomberg High Yield Bond Index (US High Yield), as of January 31, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> CS European High Yield Bond Index (EU HY), CS European Loan Index (EU Loans), as of January 31, 2022

<sup>32</sup> JP Morgan CLOIE, February 1, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> BofA CLO Weekly Update. February 3, 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Pitchbook LCD, Global CLO Roundup, January 31, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Pitchbook LCD, Global CLO Roundup, January 31, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> S&P Corporate Rating Actions Tracker 2023, January 27, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> BofA CLO Weekly Update. February 3, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> BofA Global Research, Markit, ICE Data Indices, LLC, S&P LCD, February 3, 2023.

**Past performance is not necessarily indicative of future results. There can be no assurance that any Blackstone strategy or product will achieve their objectives or avoid significant losses. Capital is at risk and investors may not get back the amount originally invested.**



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- <sup>39</sup> Byron Wien, Vice Chairman of Private Wealth Solutions, A Good Start to the Year, Though Risks Remain, January 31, 2023.
- <sup>40</sup> Bank analysts (BofA, Barclays, JPM, MS) predict positive returns across credit markets in 2023
- <sup>41</sup> Slide 8, 2022 Blackstone Credit Limited Partner Advisory Committee Meeting, November 2022.
- <sup>42</sup> I/B/E/S data from Refinitiv, S&P Global, and Macrobond, February 7, 2023.
- <sup>43</sup> FactSet, January 27, 2023, Refinitiv, February 2, 2023.
- <sup>44</sup> JPM Research, Interest(ing) coverage scenarios for leveraged loans in a rising rate environment, as of April 19, 2022. Blackstone Credit Investment Team, January 2023.
- <sup>45</sup> Morningstar LSTA Leveraged Loan Index (represented by spread to maturity and yield to maturity), Bloomberg US High Yield Index (represented by OAS and yield to maturity), Credit Suisse Western European Leveraged Loan Index (represented by 3-year discount margin and current yield), and Credit Suisse Western European High Yield Index (represented by spread to worst and yield to worst), as of January 31, 2023.

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