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Michael Giltz

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Alternate Grammys: The Best CDs of 2007

Posted February 8, 2008 | 08:52 PM (EST)

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A best CDs of the year list in February? Why not? (Calendars are so 20th century.) My end of the year is always hectic. Freelance journalists are deluged with work around the holidays because staffers want to spend time with their families. Add in time with my own family and friends, a deluge of movies (my best movies of 2007 list is here) and suddenly that pile of CDs gets shoved aside until January.

So the Grammy Awards serve as my own personal deadline for compiling a list of the Best CDs of the year. You'll find a list, followed by the same list with commentary describing the artists and what I love about their albums. Record stores may be closing left and right but anyone who says there's no excitement in music just isn't listening. Soul, pop, rock, jazz, Broadway, Americana, rap, world music, country, film scores -- there's a lot to love. Enjoy!

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THE BEST CDS OF 2007

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- 1. Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings - 100 Days 100 Nights (classic soul)/ Various Artists - The Great Debaters Soundtrack (juke joint music)
2. Patty Griffin - Children Running Through

- (career-capping Americana)
3. Radiohead - In Rainbows (the world-conquering pop they were born to make)
4. Tinariwen - Aman Iman: Water Is Life (desert rock)
5. Robert Plant and Alison Krauss - Raising Sand (adult pop)
6. The White Stripes - Icky Thump (bluesy, stomping rock n roll)
7. Terence Blanchard - A Tale of God's Will (a requiem for Katrina) (melancholic jazz) / Jonny Greenwood - There Will Be Blood (spooky, spine-tingling score)
8. Steve Earle - Washington Square Serenade / Suzanne Vega - Beauty & Crimes (country and folk pop triumphs both, but don't call it a comeback)
9. Jamie T - Panic Prevention / Livesavas - Gutterfly (Brit rap; Seventies funk fantasia)
10. Amy Winehouse - Back To Black (bruised retro soul)

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11. **Arcade Fire** - *Neon Bible* (art rock a la Talking Heads)
12. **Andy Bey** - *Ain't Necessarily So* (searching jazz vocals)
13. **Fountains of Wayne** - *Traffic and Weather* (pure pop) / **Ron Sexsmith** - *Time Being* (purer pop)
14. **Tabu Ley Rochereau** - *The Voice Of Lightness* (floating, Al Green-like world music)
15. **The Feeling** - *Twelve Stops and Home* (Seventies AM radio) / **The Fratellis** - *Costello Music* (raucous rock)
16. **Teddy Thompson** - *Upfront & Down Low* (dignified country classics) / **Richard Thompson** - *Sweet Warrior* (sterling rock) / **Linda Thompson** - *Versatile Heart* (delicate folk pop)
17. **Bassekou Kouyate & Ngoni ba** - *Segu Blue* (irresistible world music for people mourning Ali Farka)
18. **Herbie Hancock** - *River: The Joni Letters* (Mitchell done proud via jazz)
19. **Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Ray Price** - *Last Of The Breed* (country summit) / **Levon Helm** - *Dirt Farmer* (Lazarus-like revival) / **Porter Wagoner** - *Wagonmaster* (classy send-off)
20. **Arctic Monkeys** - *Favourite Worst Nightmare* (jagged Brit pop) - **Kaiser Chiefs** - *Yours Truly, Angry Mob* (spiky but smooth Brit pop)

21. **Various Artists** - *The Roots Of Chica - Psychedelic Cumbias From Peru* (garage rock via South America)
22. **Common** - *Finding Forever* (rap for adults)
23. **Stephen Fretwell** - *Man On The Roof* (unheralded UK folk-pop)
24. **Betty LaVette** - *The Scene Of The Crime* (steeped in wisdom soul) / **Mary Weiss** - *Dangerous Game* (old school pop, happily)
25. **Josh Ritter** - *The Historical Conquests Of Josh Ritter* (literate folk pop with a smile)
26. **Andy Palacio & The Garifuna Collective** - *Watina* / **Puerto Plata** - *Mujer de Cabaret* (both beautiful, vanishing traditions)
27. **The Hives** - *The Black and White Album* (confident, swaggering rock)
28. **David Bromberg** - *Try Me One More Time* / **John Hammond** - *Push Comes To Shove* (grizzled old white man blues) / **Watermelon Slim & The Workers** - *The Wheel Man* (the blues, you fool)
29. **Robert Wyatt** - *Comicoopera* (eccentric pop-jazz thingamajig)
30. **The Real Tuesday Weld** - *The London Book Of The Dead* (sneakily ambitious retro pop)

31. **Joan Armatrading** - *Into The Blues* (do call it a comeback)
32. **The Magic Numbers** - *Those The Brokes* (disappointing but good) / **Darren Hayes** - *This Delicate Thing We've Made* (good but disappointing)
33. **Bruce Springsteen with the Sessions Band** - *Live In Dublin* (party in the barn music)
34. **Nicole Atkins** - *Neptune City* (brooding, Orbison-like pop)
35. **Sergio & Odair Assad** - *Jardim Abandonado* (telepathic classical guitar)
36. **Raul Malo** - *After Hours* (country-politan with velvet vocals)
37. **Various Artists** - *Company Original Broadway Cast (2007)* (Sondheim, passionately)
38. **Kelly Willis** - *Translated From Love* (country, smartly)
39. **Panda Bear** - *Person Pitch* (Brian Wilson on LSD, if that's not redundant)
40. **Over The Rhine** - *Snow Angels* (Christmas rock for NPR listeners)

41. **Jens Lekman** - *Night Falls Over Kortedala* (Magentic Fields via Sweden)
42. **Ian Hunter** - *Shrunken Heads* (cock rock)
43. **Beirut** - *The Flying Cup Club*
44. **Juanes** - *La Vida* (fist-shaking rock)
45. **The Holmes Brothers** - *State of Grace* (master class in the blues)
46. **Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova** - *The Swell Season* (you know, those great songs from the movie *Once*)
47. **Ryan Adams and the Cardinals** - *Follow The Lights* (Americana, again)
48. **John Corigliano** - *Music For String Quartet* (American classical)
49. **Dee Dee Bridgewater** - *Red Earth: A Malian Journey* (jazz meets Mali) / **Abbey Lincoln** - *Abbey Sings Abbey* (astringent jazz)
50. **The Donnas** - *Bitchin'* (dumb, fun as hell Eighties rock)

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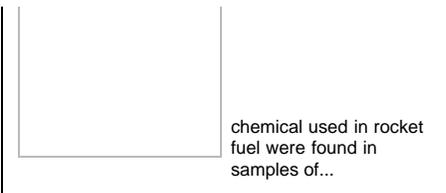
1. **Feist** / "1234"
2. **Rihanna** / "Umbrella"
3. **Mika** / "Grace Kelly"
4. **Norah Jones** / "Thinking About You"
5. **John Mellencamp** / "Our Country"
6. **They Might Be Giants** / "The Mesopotamians"
7. **White Rabbits** / "The Plot"
8. **Bjork** / "Declare Independence"
9. **John Fogerty** / "I Can't Take It No More"
10. **The Pipettes** / "Your Kisses Are Wasted On Me"

FAVORITE REISSUES

1. **Bob Dylan** - *The Other Side Of The Mirror: Live At The Newport Folk Festival 1963-1965* (revelatory documentary film)
2. **Prefab Sprout** - *Steve McQueen* (Steely Dan-like pop stripped down beautifully)
3. **Culture** - *Two Sevens Clash 30th Anniversary Edition* (anthemic reggae)
4. **Emmylou Harris** - *Songbird* (the queen of Americana)
5. **Joy Division** - album reissues
6. **Various Artists** -- *City Of Dreams: A Collection Of New Orleans Music* (a joyous dive into the vaults of Rounder)
7. **Van Morrison** - *The Best Of Van Morrison Volume 3* (if you pick and choose carefully, his last decade sounds damn good)
8. **Jennifer Warnes** - *Famous Blue Raincoat* (a perfect intro to Leonard Cohen)
9. **The Traveling Wilburys** - *The Traveling Wilburys Collection* (shambling, genial but some undeniable singles)
10. **Pink Floyd** - *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn* / **Moby Grape** - *Listen My Friends: The Best Of Moby Grape* (awesome psychedelia)

THE BEST CDS OF 2007 - THE EXTENDED LIST

1. **Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings** - *100 Days 100 Nights* (classic soul)/ **Various Artists** - *The Great Debaters Soundtrack* (juke joint music) - Sharon Jones is the beginning and the end, an old school singer who sounds like she came straight from the Stax studios through a time tunnel and into the present. I've struggled all year to define the difference between "retro" music that just sort of apes the past and the real deal. But you can't define it. You just feel it. Jones and the Dap-Kings have been steeped in classic soul for years and this album is their greatest achievement yet. Fanatics will love the little touches, like the way the songs sometimes fade out quickly just like the old pop singles where a tune would simply run out of space on the 45 and they'd have to dial down the sound abruptly at the end. But this isn't just for hardcore collectors. It's great, great stuff, with one pounding, unforgettable, heart-pumping song after another. Think Aretha. Think Otis Redding. Think Brooklyn's Sharon Jones. She's all over the soundtrack to the Denzel Washington feel-good drama *The Great Debaters*. The movie was too soft-focus for my taste but credit Washington for great taste in music. This is like a night at a juke joint...if the juke joint happened to be jammed full of some of the best talent around. Jones (who has a cameo in the movie) sings everything from gospel to blues, with Alvin Youngblood Hart the prime mover and shaker, whether dueting with Jones or backed by the Carolina Chocolate Drops string band. Anyone adventurous enough to own the *O Brother Where Art Thou* soundtrack should run right out and pick this up. Now. And Saturday night, put on *100 Days 100 Nights* and *The Great Debaters* back to back and you've got yourself a party.
2. **Patty Griffin** - *Children Running Through* (career-capping Americana) - For much of the year, until Jones slipped past her, I was convinced this would be the album of the year. Like John Hiatt's classic *Bring The Family*, this is the crowning achievement in a durable career. I've always admired Griffin, her albums were fine, people regularly covered her songs...but it never quite all came together for her. Till now. From the funky, syncopated "Stay On The Ride" to the story song of "Trapeze" and the rafters-raising "Heavenly Days," this is a talented artist delivering just the right songs with just the right musicians at just the right moment. Pure magic a la Hiatt or Bonnie



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Raitt's *Nick Of Time*.

3. **Radiohead** - *In Rainbows* (the world-conquering pop they were born to make) - Now was that so hard, Mr. Yorke? People can talk all they want about *Kid A* and *Amnesiac* and *Hail To The Thief*. The truth is that Radiohead delivered genius with *The Bends* and *OK Computer* and then ran screaming from the massive sales and acclaim. Now, finally, they've embraced again their apparently effortless ability to deliver brilliant, thought-provoking songs with melodies that stride continents with ease. Great stuff.

4. **Tinariwen** - *Aman Iman: Water Is Life* (desert rock) - Don't ask me why or how, but I suddenly realized that half the world music I'd been obsessed with this year came from Mali. Tinariwen is a desert collective, a despised minority scrabbling out an existence. And out in the middle of nowhere, Tinariwen plug in and deliver rock -- and rock that builds on their folk traditions with the swagger of the Rolling Stones.

5. **Robert Plant and Alison Krauss** - *Raising Sand* (adult pop) - Strange bedfellows, to say the least. But what a heart-stopping paring with Plant's stadium-ready vocals pared down and Krauss's delicate yearning given a swift kick in the pants, all in service of gems like "Please Read The Letter" and "Let Your Loss Be Your Lesson." Perhaps the unlikely triumph yet by producer T Bone Burnett. Perfect for mum and dad.

6. **The White Stripes** - *Icky Thump* (bluesy, stomping rock n roll) - I can't quite figure out how people turn on to some of their albums and turn off others. The White Stripes strike me as ferociously committed to exploring anything and everything. Who can't love the yelp of "Little Cream Soda," the catchiness of "You Don't Know What Love Is" or the roar of "Icky Thump?" I keep waiting for them to take a wrong step. They haven't. And the louder you play it the better it sounds, which is always a good sign.

7. **Terence Blanchard** - *A Tale of God's Will (a requiem for Katrina)* (melancholic jazz / **Jonny Greenwood** - *There Will Be Blood* (spooky, spine-tingling score) - Two instrumental compositions that haunt me. Blanchard based his new album in part on the score he delivered for Spike Lee's documentary about Katrina. But this album - which also includes pieces by his bandmembers - is a rich and moving work in its own right, sad, mournful, defiant, angry and somehow hopeful. I don't get inspired so much as spooked by the terrific tunes Radiohead's Greenwood used so marvelously in the Daniel Day-Lewis film *There Will Be Blood*. Unshakeable.

8. **Steve Earle** - *Washington Square Serenade* / **Suzanne Vega** - *Beauty & Crimes* (country and folk pop triumphs both, but don't call it a comeback) - What a year for Steve Earle. He filmed his final scenes for the HBO drama *The Wire* (easily one of the best shows of all time), recorded the theme song for it and delivered his strongest album in years. If you enjoyed Earle in the past but haven't paid attention in a while, climb back on board. The same goes for Suzanne Vega, who offers a tribute to New York City in the best possible style: by writing sharp, unsentimental, intelligent pop that digs deep.

9. **Jamie T** - *Panic Prevention* / **Livesavas** - *Gutterfly* (Brit rap; Seventies funk fantasia) - For a few years now, I've been arguing that the best rap is coming out of the UK, thanks to The Streets, Dizzee Rascal and the like. Jamie T continues the tradition with the droll wit that comes so easily to the Brits and an offbeat soundscape that is his secret weapon. Then along comes Livesavas to prove America hasn't completely floundered yet when it comes to rap. They've produced the soundtrack to an imaginary Seventies blaxploitation flick and yes, flutes, funky bass and groovy dialogue are all on tap. Sensational and everything Jay-Z's album wanted to be but wasn't.

10. **Amy Winehouse** - *Back To Black* (bruised retro soul) - Sharon Jones pops up again. Not vocally, but via her band the Dap-Kings, would pumped tremendous life into much of this album, including the unstoppable single "Rehab." Winehouse is the real deal, but it never hurts to have the right backing band.

11. **Arcade Fire** - *Neon Bible* (art rock a la Talking Heads) - They have a gift for creating tension, the feeling that SOMETHING momentous is about to happen. Rousing stuff.

12. **Andy Bey** - *Ain't Necessarily So* (searching jazz vocals) - Who knows why this live album recorded a decade ago has stayed on the shelf? Bey had just come back into the limelight with a hit album and this set shows him suffused with the joy of doing what he loves and knowing that after a long dry spell that people were listening. He doesn't have the molasses pacing of Shirley Horn but they both know how to dig deep.

13. **Fountains of Wayne** - *Traffic and Weather* (pure pop) / **Ron Sexsmith** - *Time Being* (purer pop) -- Who knows why certain acts fall in and out of favor. For a brief moment, FoW was the toast of the town. Nothing changed but the spotlight moved on. It will probably find them again when their work on the Broadway-bound musical *Cry-Baby* is heard. But don't wait. *Traffic and Weather* proves they've been creating pure pop all along. Ron Sexsmith is so dependably catchy and literate that magazines have run out of things to say. Here's another Sexsmith album



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that will make pop lovers swoon but fail to conquer the charts? Hardly words to begin a cover story. But what a talent. Paul McCartney has an heir, indeed.

14. **Tabu Ley Rochereau** - *The Voice Of Lightness* (floating, Al Green-like world music) - "The Voice of Lightness?" Hmm, catchy nickname. Then you play the first track of this two disc compilation by the Congo legend and suddenly you're floating up to the sky the way you did the first time you heard Al Green. Addictive pop.

15. **The Feeling** - *Twelve Stops and Home* (Seventies AM radio) / **The Fratellis** - *Costello Music* (raucous rock) - Listen to The Feeling and you'll get a big, goofy grin on your face. Like Midlake, they traffic in a Seventies rock radio vibe with brilliant tunes like "Sewn" and "I Want You Now" that will have you checking the liner notes of this UK band. Is this a greatest hits compilation? Or just an album that could be? It doesn't hurt that the lead singer toys with saying he's bisexual just like Bowie. Ah, the Brits. Their compatriots the Fratellis make a big noise with infectious rock that is like Elvis (Costello) in a particularly upbeat mood.

16. **Teddy Thompson** - *Upfront & Down Low* (dignified country classics) / **Richard Thompson** - *Sweet Warrior* (sterling rock) / **Linda Thompson** - *Versatile Heart* (delicate folk pop) - The Thompson clan does itself proud. Teddy does a covers album of country classics and digging into sneering numbers like "You Finally Said Something Good (When You Said Goodbye)" seemed to release the inner swagger in the reserved Thompson's lovely voice. It'll be fascinating to see how making it affects his next solo album. Pop Richard - world's greatest guitarist, thank you very much - delivers yet another impeccable solo album, his best since Mock Tudor. It seemed to be merely good, but suddenly in the second half one corker after another was released and you just shake your head with pleasure. Mum Linda threatened her triumphant comeback album *Fashionably Late* might be her last. Bollocks. This isn't quite as exceptional, but it's always a joy to hear her sing.

17. **Bassekou Kouyate & Ngoni ba** - *Segu Blue* (irresistible world music for people mourning Ali Farka) - More music from Mali, with Kouyate apparently the first person to center an album around the stringed instrument the Ngoni, hence the album's pairing. It's like saying "Eric Clapton & Stratocaster.") This isn't some National Geographic special, however. You'll be on your feet and swaying in minutes.

18. **Herbie Hancock** - *River: The Joni Letters* (Mitchell done proud via jazz) - Hancock says this album was the first time he ever really focused on the lyrics of the songs he was performing. (Mainly because he was working with singers. Dude, that's the ONLY way to record meaningful covers of standards, even if no one is saying the words. Well, he learned his lesson just in time as this all-star album does right by Joni Mitchell, one of the jazziest of pop's poets. Tina Turner is a revelation on "Edith and the Kingpin" (I didn't know she had it in her) but I can't help treasuring Leonard Cohen's spoken word finale, "The Jungle Line." If that doesn't grab you, nothing will.

19. **Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Ray Price** - *Last Of The Breed* (country summit) / **Levon Helm** - *Dirt Farmer* (Lazarus-like revival) / **Porter Wagoner** - *Wagonmaster* (classy send-off) - When pop and rock stars get together, it's often such a "big moment" freighted with import that little of value comes out of it. But country and folk and jazz do these summit meetings with ease. Is it because of their traditions of front porch and late night jam sessions? I don't know. But Willie and Merle and Ray got together and sang a few tunes and somebody knew what was happening was pretty great because they kept the tapes rolling and filled up two CDs. Levon Helm's comeback after years of fighting illness and being reduced to a ragged whisper is truly heartwarming. But heartwarming doesn't make for a good album, just a good story. Singing well makes for a good album and that's what he does. Any volume sacrificed is made up for by sharper insight. And I haven't thought about Wagoner much since Dolly Parton went solo. But Marty Stuart gave him a great final bow with this elegant, fitting album that wasn't meant as a tribute or valedictory and is all the more satisfying because of it.

20. **Arctic Monkeys** - *Favourite Worst Nightmare* (jagged Brit pop) - **Kaiser Chiefs** - *Yours Truly, Angry Mob* (spiky but smooth Brit pop) - These two UK bands are invariably paired in my mind, the way Oasis and Blur were, though there's no rivalry to speak of. But their debuts came out at the same time and I gave round one to the Kaiser Chiefs. Round two goes to Arctic Monkeys but it remains a close call. The Monkeys craft better albums but the Chiefs are gonna have one amazing greatest hits CD, thanks to singles like "Ruby" and "The Angry Mob."

21. **Various Artists** - *The Roots Of Chica - Psychedelic Cumbias From Peru* (garage rock via South America) - utterly "inauthentic" psychedelic rock and roll from Peru that will rock your house. Crank it up.

22. **Common** - *Finding Forever* (rap for adults) - a lone voice of sanity in the boring world of American rap. Solid and smart, with the added bonus of that addictive theme song for the animated show *The Boondocks* as the closer.

23. **Stephen Fretwell** - *Man On The Roof* (unheralded UK folk-pop) - I kept seeing this album

advertised in the UK press, with some laudatory reviews and intriguing song titles. But that was it. I didn't see any interviews and it never got released here. Finally I broke down and bought a \$28 import (gulp). What a treasure. His earlier guy-and-a-guitar approach had been fleshed out beautifully, putting meat on the bones of his observant, engaging songs. The real deal.

24. **Betty LaVette** - *The Scene Of The Crime* (steeped in wisdom soul) / **Mary Weiss** - *Dangerous Game* (old school pop, happily) LaVette came back for good with *I've Got My Own Hell To Raise*, a great album covering female songwriters. Now she's delivered her own response record, this one covering all male songwriters. 120 proof but goes down smooth. Mary Weiss is a girl group survivor of the Shangri-Las who said, what the heck, let's do an album and proved she could still raise some hell, herself.

25. **Josh Ritter** - *The Historical Conquests Of Josh Ritter* (literate folk pop with a smile) -- I've liked his albums for a while but it was seeing Ritter in concert where he just seemed so darn happy to be performing that made me a serious fan. Another very good album that sinks in slowly and then stays there.

26. **Andy Palacio & The Garifuna Collective** - *Watina* / **Puerto Plata** - *Mujer de Cabaret* (both beautiful, vanishing traditions) -- Finally, some world music now from Mali. Palacio is a pop star in the Caribbean but was persuaded to record an album capturing the elegiac music of the Garifuna peoples, a group reduced to mere hundreds of thousands with their language and culture slipping away. Elegant, stirring stuff. Plata proves the musical style of son doesn't belong solely to the Cubans He's from the Dominican Republic and after decades where repressive regimes kept his music hidden, the 83 year old makes his recording debut. It's a very basic live recording, but Plata's exuberant swing wins you over easily.

27. **The Hives** - *The Black and White Album* (confident, swaggering rock) - They came crashing in with a group of other rock bands. But the Hives have gone to the woodshed, studied hard and really delivered with this boisterous, infectious work.

28. **David Bromberg** - *Try Me One More Time* / **John Hammond** - *Push Comes To Shove* (grizzled old white man blues) / **Watermelon Slim & The Workers** - *The Wheel Man* (the blues, you fool) - Lots of blues, here. Bromberg is heard on his first album in 17 years. Like so many bluesman, the years only make them better. Hammond doesn't miss a beat and makes it seem easy. But it's Oklahoma native Watermelon Slim that had me rolling in the aisles and not thinking about the blues but just feeling it.

29. **Robert Wyatt** - *Comicoopera* (eccentric pop-jazz thingamajig) - Is there anyone in the US to compare to Wyatt? Not really. He's not Captain Beefheart, really, who always seemed to have stayed out in the sun a tad too long. His music is more from the head than the gut, but often breathtakingly beautiful, filled with jazzy chords and meandering melodies that slowly coalesce around a perfect if opaque lyric. Here Wyatt is more accessible than usual, making this a great entry point for newcomers who are feeling adventurous. No signposts here, but you might bump into Brian Eno and Van Dyke Parks.

30. **The Real Tuesday Weld** - *The London Book Of The Dead* (sneakily ambitious retro pop) - This UK band might have been much higher on my list if I hadn't discovered them at the last minute. If you know the lovably retro music of Richard Swift, think of this as his UK pal. They don't really have much in common, other than a love for vintage music and contemporary lyrics that intrigue. If Pink Floyd slipped into the Fifties to record a concept album, it might sound like this.

31. **Joan Armatrading** - *Into The Blues* (do call it a comeback) -- Why didn't more people talk about this? Just a great, rousing set of tunes from the too long gone Armatrading.

32. **The Magic Numbers** - *Those The Brokes* (disappointing but good) / **Darren Hayes** - *This Delicate Thing We've Made* (good but disappointing) -- Lov the Magic Numbers but I got spoiled by seeing them in concert. Now I know how absolutely brilliant they can be and this album (almost as good as their debut) falls short. Darren Hayes of Savage Garden delivers a wildly ambitious, autobiographical double CD. It's frustrating how hard it is for indie artists to get on the radio. Hayes should be an automatic add for adult contemporary stations. Sure, the album could be stronger as a single CD but the problem here isn't the length. It's the emphasis on the dance floor. Hayes is much, much stronger on pure pop. If radio wakes up, a handful of tunes - especially "Words" and "Casey" will be massive, massive hits.

33. **Bruce Springsteen with the Sessions Band** - *Live In Dublin* (party in the barn music) - Yep, Bruce delivered a classic album this year, but it wasn't *Magic*. I thought that album had a terrific batch of songs (his strongest since *Tunnel Of Love*) but I just don't like how producer Brendan O'Brien records Bruce's vocals. They sound smoothed out and bland to me; no personality. Live, his songs were much better than the album version and "Girls in Their Summer Clothes" and "Radio Nowhere" will be on set lists for years to come. But for a great album, I prefer this live recording of his excellent band performing the tunes from *The Seeger Sessions*. Unbeatable fun.

34. **Nicole Atkins** - *Neptune City* (brooding, Orbison-like pop) - A very promising debut with touches of Roy Orbison, Phil Spector, Chris Isaak and the like. "The Way It Is" is classic and "Brooklyn's On Fire!" is a gas live. I expect her to get better and better.

35. **Sergio & Odair Assad** - *Jardim Abandonado* (telepathic classical guitar) - two classical guitarists who are so in tune with each other that tunes from Jobim to Debussy to the showstopper - Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" - float by effortlessly. Someone could treat this as aural wallpaper to leave on in the background during afternoon tea. Don't. Pay attention.

36. **Raul Malo** - *After Hours* (country-politan with velvet vocals) - The marvelous voice behind once and future country greats the Mavericks, Malo slides into some classic country tunes, sans the quirkiness that enlivened his band's similarly themed album *Music For All Occasions*.

37. **Stephen Sondheim** -- *Company: Original Broadway Cast (2007)* (Sondheim, passionately) - My favorite new musical of the year was an Off Off Broadway gem called *Yank!* about two soldiers falling in love during World War II. I'm greedily listening to a demo recording of the music and looking forward to a future production Off Broadway or elsewhere with a full cast. As for revivals, the best was *Company*. On stage the stunt of having cast members play all the instruments worked beautifully. On the cast album, you're left with impassioned performances, led by Raul Esparza's career-defining Bobby.

38. **Kelly Willis** - *Translated From Love* (country, smartly) - Sure she got a little lost. But she never lost her voice. And when Willis was ready to bear down and had just the right pushy sort of producer in Chuck Prophet (who kept her out of her comfort zone), the result was perhaps her best album yet. If you've been a fan, come back. If you haven't, you should be.

39. **Panda Bear** - *Person Pitch* (Brian Wilson on LSD, if that's not redundant) -- Trippy, hippy, Beach Boys-like music from a member of Animal Collective.

40. **Over The Rhine** - *Snow Angels* (Christmas rock for NPR listeners) - Their new CD didn't floor me. But this second holiday CD from the indie stalwarts blew me away - lots of great originals make this a keeper for someone who has literally hundreds of Christmas CDs and can be very picky. "North Pole Man" alone is destined for lots of mixtapes in the future.

41. **Jens Lekman** - *Night Falls Over Kortedala* (Magnetic Fields via Sweden) - That dreamy lost boy look of Lekman on the cover of his new CD is perfect. He swoons over pop melodies, pours out literate, clever lyrics by the yard and wraps it up in beautiful, larky arrangements that include lots and lots of strings and choirs and clever little touches. "And I Remember Every Kiss." "Friday Night At The Drive-In Bingo." "If I Could Cry (it would feel like this)." If you're smiling already, this is for you.

42. **Ian Hunter** - *Shrunkn Heads* (cock rock) - Like an idiot, I never realized Mott The Hoople was more than a one hit wonder thanks to David Bowie's "All The Young Dudes." Some great reissues soon turned my head around and now a new solo CD from head Mott Ian Hunter proves he's still the cock of the walk.

43. **Beirut** - *The Flying Cup Club* - This kid's debut CD sounded like gypsy music from Eastern Europe. His second CD sounds like it was recorded in a French cabaret. Infact, Zach Condon is from New Mexico. I have no idea what's going on here, but I'm still listening.

44. **Juanes** - *La Vida* (fist-shaking rock) - a Colombian superstar, Juanes is clearly politically committed and that passion pours out of these Spanish-language rockers. Getting better and better.

45. **The Holmes Brothers** - *State of Grace* (master class in the blues) - Everything from Lyle Lovett to Elvis Costello, delivered with grace and verve.

46. **Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova** - *The Swell Season* (you know, those great songs from the movie *Once*) - Like many people, I caught up with this solo work by Frames lead singer Hansard via the movie *Once*. I bought this before the soundtrack came out so this is what I listened to. A tad too stately for me at times, but the numbers from the movie are just remarkable.

47. **Ryan Adams and the Cardinals** - *Follow The Lights* (Americana, again) -- Hey, if Ryan Adams knew when it was going to work and when it wasn't, he'd probably be even happier than you or mere. After a few years of just pouring out music wily-nily, he settled down a bit. Unfortunately, *Easy Tiger* wasn't quite in focus yet. But this EP is. I don't know why, but it is. Back for good, I hope.

48. **John Corigliano** - *Music For String Quartet* (American classical) - A shameful lack of classical music this year. But at least I stayed on top of some contemporary composers, including Corigliano, who is featured in this album which includes a string quartet, two shorter works and - generously - shares the bill with a string quartet by the handsome young composer Jefferson Friedman who has studied with Corigliano and others and who has already been commissioned for numerous pieces including a chamber opera and two orchestral works. One to watch.

49. **Dee Dee Bridgewater** - *Red Earth: A Malian Journey* (jazz meets Mali) / **Abbey Lincoln** - *Abbey Sings Abbey* (astringent jazz) - One more trip to Mali, this time with Bridgewater, who felt such an identity with the music of that region (along with physical similarities) between her and

people she met, that she became convinced her roots were there. The result is a bold album that mixes jazz with Malian music performed by some of the country's brightest lights, including Bassekou Kouyate. Inspiring. And Lincoln has always offered up at least one or two originals on her albums. Here she digs deep and plumbs her own catalog, taking another sharp-eyed look at gems like her timeless standard "Throw It Away."

50. **The Donnas** - *Bitchin'* (dumb, fun as hell Eighties rock) - We started with fun (Sharon Jones) so let's end there. The Donnas dive into Eighties stadium rock (right down to packaging that emphasizes tight, tight pants and super-cool logos) and the results are roof-blasting fun like "Don't Wait Up For Me," "Love You Till It Hurts," and "Girl Talk." Like the Go-Gos on steroids or Def Leppard with a lot more cleavage. Totally hot.

FAVORITE SINGLES OF 2007

1. **Feist** / "1234" - Inescapable, happily so. (But not written by Feist and her album sadly never held my attention.)
2. **Rihanna** / "Umbrella" - Inescapable, sometimes unhappily so.
3. **Mika** / "Grace Kelly" - Delirious pop; what the radio was made for.
4. **Norah Jones** / "Thinking About You" - Melody is not her strong suit, which makes this pop gem stand out all the more on her new album. Maybe if her voice weren't so bewitching she'd spend more time on creating hooks.
5. **John Mellencamp** / "Our Country" - an almost embarrassingly blunt album lyrically, but it came into focus here.
6. **They Might Be Giants** / "The Mesopotamians" - their goofiest and catchiest song since "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)" and that's saying something. Snatch up their terrific new album for kids Here Come The 1, 2, 3's. It's a gem. Rent a kid if you don't have one and enjoy.
7. **White Rabbits** / "The Plot" - A solid debut, especially if this brilliantly structured song is a sign of things to come.
8. **Bjork** / "Declare Independence" - Bonkers, of course, which we want from Bjork. Her new album sort of plods along and suddenly she's squealing out, "Start your own currency! / Make your own stamp!" and I think, Bjork! How are you!
9. **John Fogerty** / "I Can't Take It No More" - He's still got that voice and, bless him, he's still pissed about that "Fortunate Son."
10. **The Pipettes** / "Your Kisses Are Wasted On Me" - would be Spice Girls trio with Spector-like singles that pummel you into submission.

Whew! Are you still here? Tell me about some of your favorites.

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My favorite Nellie McKay song was "Mother of Pearl," which was so clever it had you laughing and then realizing she was laughing at you about feminism, etc. I like that she did a single CD but still found it a bit unfocused. Maybe she needs to write a musical to channel her massive talent into a project that truly shows what she can do.

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Geez, is there one person on this Huffpo conglomeration that knows anything about "jazz"? It is the only "American" music, you know.

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I've always been a lot more comfortable with rating jazz singers like Andy Bey, Dee Dee Bridgewater and Abbey Lincoln than instrumental jazz like Terence Blanchard and Herbie Hancock (here with a vocal dominated album) and others. (All of them are on my list.) Some others I listened to like Charles Tolliver & His Big Band just didn't quite make the list. And I barely glanced at classical music. But please share: what were some of the best jazz albums of the year?

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Oh and what about the musical? I think jazz and the musical are both considered uniquely American contributions to the art form. Of course, since I'm British I'm not terribly concerned with what country lays claim to what genre. All I care about is good music.

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Favorite Album:

Fountains of Wayne (Traffic and Weather)

Favorite single:

Identity Theft (Nellie McKay from Obligatory Villagers)

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