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## ENTERTAINMENT

### Music: Grammys Preview -- The Fifty Best Albums Of 2012

Posted: 02/08/2013 4:02 pm

The Grammys are Sunday night on CBS and it looks to be one of the tightest races in many a moon for Album Of The Year and other top categories. My money is on Mumford & Sons because when it comes down to it, the Grammys love commercial success (especially when paired with critical acclaim) and though it's silly to say after just two albums, Mumford & Sons is overdue.

To celebrate, here are my picks for the Best Albums of 2012. First I give the list and then an extended version with comments and links to videos so you can sample the music. Enjoy! And let me know what your favorites of the year are, especially if they're not on this list. We can argue over what should be ranked where, but the main point is to discover some great new music. I hope you'll find some here.

#### THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2012

1. **Rumer** -- *Seasons Of My Soul/Boys Don't Cry* (70s pop perfection)
2. **Branford Marsalis** -- *Four MF's Playin' Their Tunes* (hard-driving jazz; faultless)
3. **The Tallest Man On Earth** -- *There's No Leaving Now*(inspiringly good Dylanesque rock)
4. **Frank Ocean** -- *Channel Orange* (state of the art soul)
5. **Paul Buchanan** -- *Mid Air* (emotionally intense, late night confessions)
- Bill Fay** -- *Life Is People* (age+wisdom+piano+God)
6. **Johann Johannsson** -- *The Miners' Hymns* (the film score of the year)
7. **Fiona Apple** -- *The Idler Wheel Is Wiser Than The Driver Of The Screw And Whipping Cords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do* (pop artist at peak of her powers)
8. **Jamey Johnson** -- *Living For A Dream: A Tribute To Hank Cochran* (all-star country hoedown)
9. **Dr. John** -- *Locked Down* (triumphant New Orleans music)
- Jon Cleary** *Occapella!* (tip of the hat to Allen Toussaint)
10. **Mumford And Sons** -- *Babel* (flowering of Americana)
- The Lumineers** -- *The Lumineers*
- Pigpen Theatre Co.** -- *Bremen*
- The Avett Brothers** -- *The Carpenter*
  
11. **Kasey Chambers And Shane Nicholson** -- *Wreck And Ruin* (world class folk-country-blues)
12. **Nas** -- *Life Is Good* (rap for grown ups)
13. **Leonard Cohen** -- *Old Ideas* (magisterial pop)
14. **Josephine** -- *Portrait* (two English lasses with talent to burn)
- Lianna La Havas** -- *Is Your Love Big Enough*
15. **Grant-Lee Phillips** -- *Walking In The Green Corn* (acoustic gem)
16. **Antibalas** -- *Antibalas* (Fela Kuti lives!)

17. **Iris Dement** -- *Sing The Delta* (comeback of the year)  
**Boo Hanks with Don Flemons** -- *Buffalo Junction*
18. **Vijay Iyer Trio** -- *Accelerando* (jazz piano)  
**Brad Mehldau** -- *Where Do You Start/Ode*
19. **The Hives** -- *Lex Hives* (rock, by god)  
**Japandroid** -- *Celebration Rock*  
**The Doughboys** -- *Shakin' Our Souls*
20. **Bruce Springsteen** -- *Wrecking Ball* (life in them old dogs yet)  
**Bob Dylan** -- *Tempest*
21. **Chris Smither** -- *Hundred Dollar Valentine* (blues master)  
22. **Diana Krall** -- *Glad Rag Doll* (digging deeper jazz talent)  
23. **Ed Sheeran** -- + (thoughtful British pop)  
24. **Kendrick Lamar** -- *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (rap smarts)  
25. **Melody Gardot** -- *The Absence* (singular voice heads to Brazil)  
26. **Father John Misty** -- *Fear Fun* (Fleet Foxes redux, in a good way)  
**Damien Jurado** -- *Maraqopa*  
**Lord Huron** -- *Impossible Dreams*  
**Boy And Bear** -- *Moonfire*
27. **The Time Jumpers** -- *The Time Jumpers* (Western swing)  
28. **Neil Young And Crazy Horse** -- *Psychedelic Pill/Americana* (still kicking, still stinging)  
29. **Michael Kiwanuka** -- *Home Again* (70s soul circa Bill Withers)  
**Miguel** -- *Kaleidoscope Dream* (70s soul circa Marvin Gaye)  
30. **Bettye LaVette** -- *Thankful N' Thoughtful* (soul survivor)
31. **Various Artists** -- *Mercyland: Hymns For The Rest Of Us* (church music for those who don't go to church and some who do)  
32. **Billy Bragg And Wilco** -- *Mermaid Avenue Volume 3* unexpected gem from vault)  
33. **Regina Spektor** -- *What We Saw From The Cheap Seats* (quirky pop)  
**Norah Jones** -- *Little Broken Hearts* (leaving jazz behind)  
34. **Jack White** -- *Blunderbuss* (eclectic; electric)  
35. **Tame Impala** -- *Lonerism* (psychedelica redefined)  
36. **Green Day** -- *Uno!/Dos!/Tres!* (purging punk pop)  
37. **Brandi Carlile** -- *Bear Creek* (an indie voice in the wilderness)  
38. **Ravi Coltrane** *Spirit Fiction* (jazz royalty, wearing the crown well)  
39. **John Mayer** -- *Born And Raised* (skip the interviews, play the music)  
40. **Punch Brothers** -- *Who's Feeling Young Now?/Ahoy* (bluegrass expanded)  
**Jason Aldean** *Night Train*(country demanded)  
**Dwight Yoakam** -- *3 Pears* (rebel remanded)
41. **Brian Eno** -- *Lux* (genius in solo instrumental mode)  
42. **Bruno Mars** -- *Unorthodox Jukebox* (Michael Jackson's heir apparent)  
43. **Suzanne Vega** -- *Close Up Vol. 4: Songs Of Family* (revealing catalog)  
44. **Jake Bugg** -- **Jake Bugg** (promising UK folkie)  
45. **Band Of Horses** -- *Mirage Rock* (career best for rockers)  
46. **The Magnetic Fields** -- *Love At The Bottom Of The Sea* (miserablist pop)  
47. **Bryan Ferry** -- *The Jazz Age* (left turn instrumentals)  
48. **David Byrne And St. Vincent** -- *Love This Giant* (a rock giant shows signs of life)  
49. **Damon Albarn** -- *Dr. Dee*(pastoral concept album about English eccentric)  
50. **Kris Kristofferson** -- *Feeling Mortal*(one foot in the grave country)

#### BEST REISSUES

- Bill Withers** -- *Bill + Withers: The Complete Sussex And Columbia Albums*  
**Louis Armstrong** -- *The Okeh, Columbia And RCA Victor Recordings 1925-1933*

#### EARLY FAVORITES FOR 2013

**The Mavericks** -- *In Time*

**Richard Thompson** -- *Electric*

**Wayne Shorter** -- *Without A Net*

**Ron Sexsmith** -- *Forever Endeavour*

**William Tyler** -- *Impossible Truth*

**Aaron Neville** -- *My True Story*

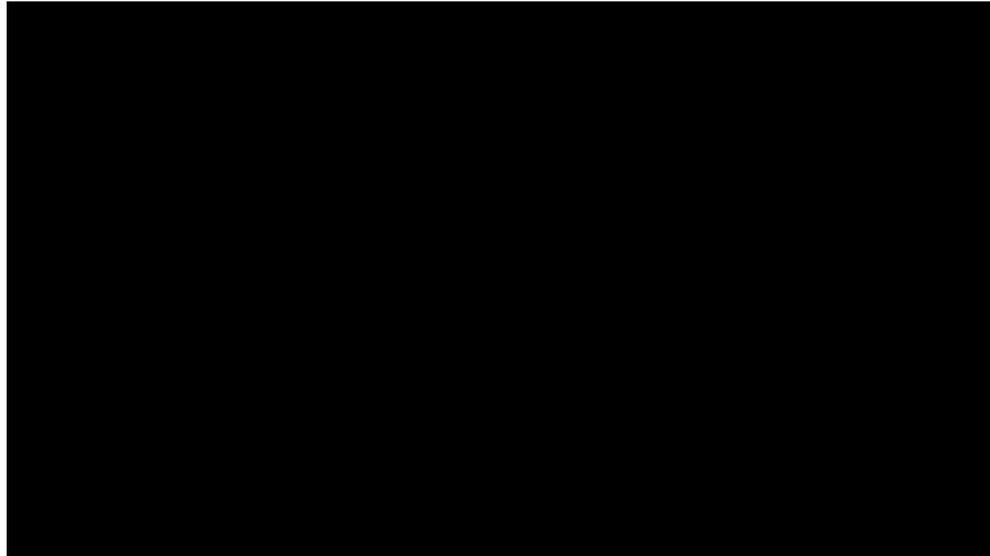
**Eels** -- *Wonderful Glorious*

**Miles Davis Quintet** -- *Live In Europe 1969: The Bootleg Series Volume Two*

## **THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2012 -- THE EXTENDED VERSION**

### 1. **Rumer** -- *Seasons Of My Soul/Boys Don't Cry* (70s pop perfection)

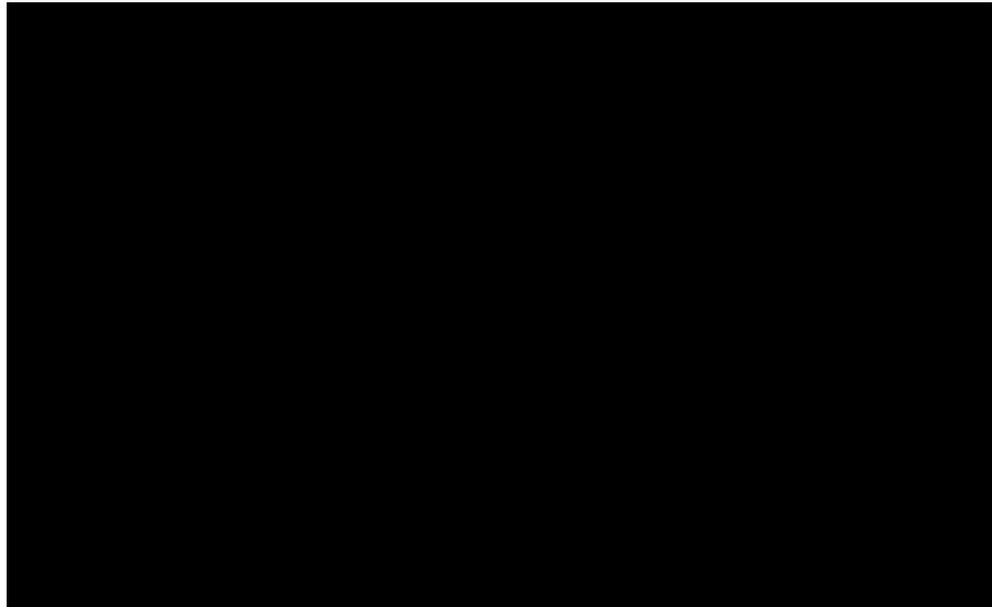
I've been waiting two years to say this: *Seasons Of My Soul* is the best album of the year. She's from the UK but Rumer isn't a soul sister like Adele. She's got a Karen Carpenter vibe, a deceptively mellow voice that proves addictive. Still waters run deep, though; her debut is an emotionally rich collection that deepens with every listen. Rumer also nods to Burt Bacharach and her demos were so striking, it's no surprise to discover that Bacharach himself invited her to meet with him and asked her to sing some of his new songs. That's like starting a rock band and having Paul McCartney call you up and say he's got a tune you might fancy. I can speak very confidently about this debut and Rumer's potential. *Seasons Of My Soul* came out in the UK in 2010 and I fell in love with it immediately. I've lived with it a long time and seen her in concert, where Rumer was even more impressive than she is on CD. You can really spot an artist that's in it for the long haul when they wow you in concert. I waited and waited for the album to come out in the US but it was delayed again and again as success took her all over the world and her label waited for the right time to launch her in the US. Her second album came out before that happened; *Boys Don't Cry* is a striking covers album showing her great taste and interpretive ability. Still, I suggest you start with the debut. That CD finally came out in January of 2012 and **I interviewed her to mark the occasion**. She got some good notices but didn't quite break out the way she did back in the UK. Don't worry; she's not going anywhere and the US will catch on at some point. Here's her wonderful debut single, "Aretha."



### 2. **Branford Marsalis** -- *Four MF's Playin' Their Tunes* (hard-driving jazz; faultless)

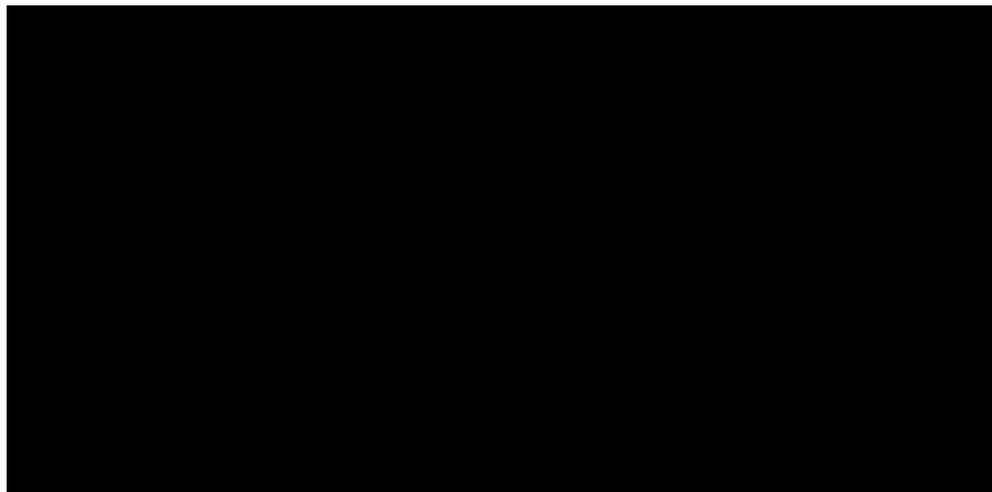
Did somebody say jazz was dead? Ha. Not when talent like Branford Marsalis can deliver straight no chaser jazz that's swinging, melodically strong and bursting with vigor. Experimentation is fine but there's no need for the trappings of other genres when the music is this good. The title is my least favorite part; it's too obvious and blunt for an album this good. Here's an in-studio look at the recording of the album closer "Treat It

Gentle." Jazz didn't die with Miles Davis and it's not just for the museum. Here's proof.



3. **The Tallest Man On Earth** -- *There's No Leaving Now*(inspiringly good Dylanesque rock)

The Tallest Man On Earth is one of the most exciting talents to emerge in recent years. He comes from Sweden, sings like he's from Woody Guthrie's part of the country and writes great folk-ish songs that would tag him as "the next Dylan" if anyone was still dumb enough to curse an artist with such a label. Best of all, he's reached the wide world thanks to the reach of digital music; great albums can indeed burst out from anywhere without the help of a major label. I somehow missed his debut, but a rave in a UK magazine sent me to the web where I quickly sampled two or three songs and then immediately downloaded the entire album from iTunes because I couldn't bear to wait for a CD. (I bought one later, anyway.) That was *The Wild Hunt*, my favorite album of 2010. Now he's released his third full length album and *There's No Leaving Now* is a confident extension of everything that's come before. TTMOE has subtly expanded his musical palette but the emphasis is still on his guitar and his songs, most of the time, with the occasional piano and other instrumentation thrown in. If anything, it might be his strongest yet. So in four years we've had three albums and two EPs, and each one has steadily improved on what came before. Plus, like Rumer, I've seen him in concert and was blown away by his skill, charisma, humor and stage presence. He is the real deal. When it comes to discovering acts all over the world in this post-record label, post-MTV, post-radio world, I've seen the future of rock and roll and it's The Tallest Man On Earth. That's why it's so easy to spot him, I suppose. Here's the lead single, the infectious "1904."



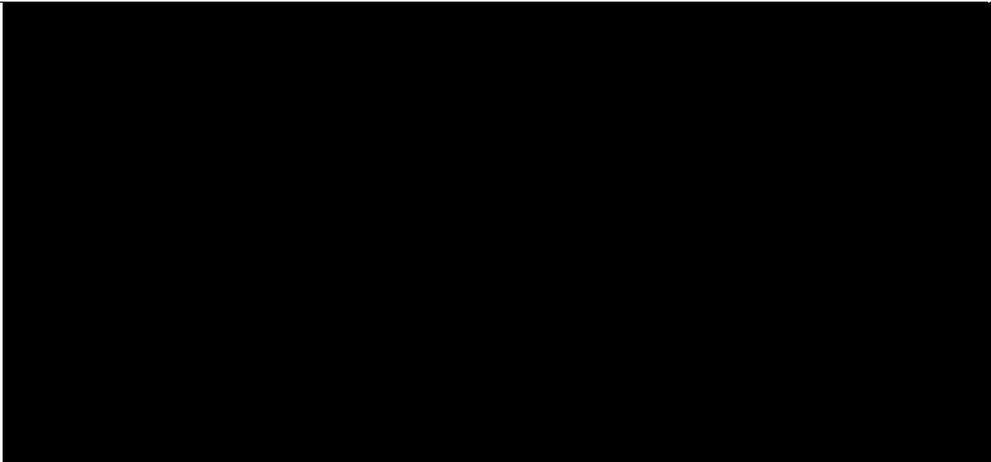
4. **Frank Ocean** -- *Channel Orange* (state of the art soul)

Frank Ocean's mixtape *Nostalgia, Ultra* scraped onto my list of the best albums of 2011. I have to admit, I wasn't expecting the full-blown r and b mastery of *Channel Orange*, which ranges from the mind-blowingly smart "Pyramids" to the cleverly emotional "Thinkin Bout You." Marvin Gaye would be taking notes. (Okay, to be accurate Ocean has been taking notes from Gaye. But you get my point: he's good.) The matter-of-fact personal backstory is just a no-fuss bonus. It's like Jackie Robinson (re)breaking the color code of baseball. When you're this talented, people will pay attention.

5. **Paul Buchanan** -- *Mid Air* (emotionally intense, late night confessions)

**Bill Fay** -- *Life Is People* (age+wisdom+piano+God)

Do you know the Blue Nile? They're a Scottish band of legendary impact in the UK, with albums coming sparingly over the years and then not at all. Their live performances have been even rarer. But like, perhaps, Nick Drake, their work has an intensity and power you simply can't get anywhere else, matched with mature lyrics and melodies to die for. Their debut *Walk Across The Rooftops* became a cult classic while *Hats* became their big seller, a landmark work that never quite moved beyond critical acclaim in the US. Nine years after their last album, leader Paul Buchanan has delivered this heartbreaker, a solo album pared down almost solely to his voice and a piano that as always focuses on the needs and concerns of adults like few other artists. The title track (below) stops me dead in my tracks. You listen to this music late at night, with the lights off, your heart almost stopping in sympathy with the beauty on display. Their debut album contained one of my favorite romantic lines, a favorite because it's so mature. Buchanan pleaded with his lover to stay, stay, promising her, "I will understand you." Really, who could ask for anything more? Now if you don't find this performance entrancing, fair enough -- move on. I'm sure something else on this list will appeal. But if you're intrigued like I was, trust me, the rest of the album is just as good. *Mid Air* is the rare pop album that delves into family, a long marriage, raising children and other concerns with the same passion the Stones brought to drinking and drugging. Just a lot quieter.



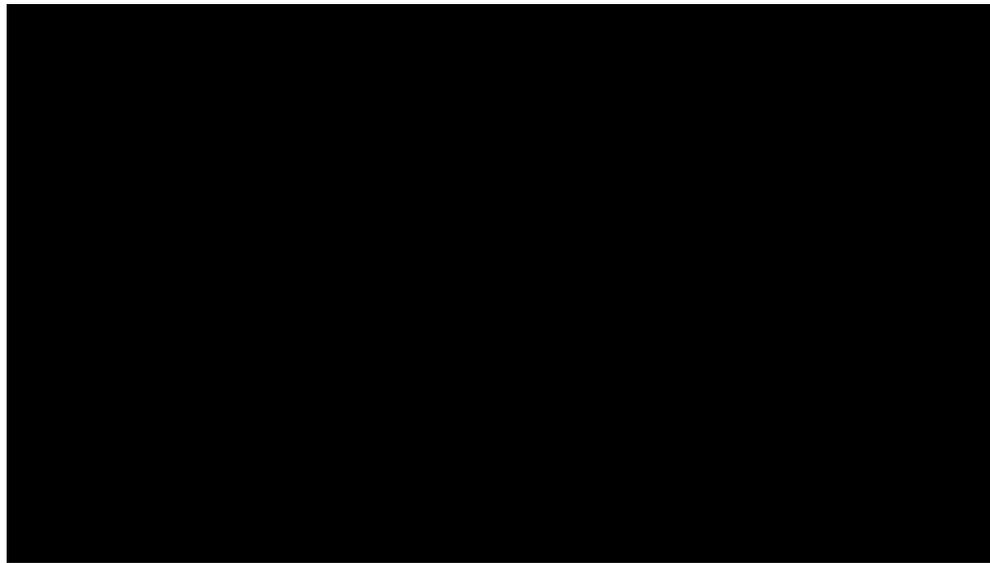
Bill Fay is a genuine cult figure from the UK. But I shouldn't pretend I've ever heard of him. *Life Is People* is his first album of all new songs in 41 years and it came with words of praise from all and sundry, many of whom claimed him as a touchstone in their lives. What? How come I've never heard of him? That's the sort of praise -- when coming from artists and critics you like -- that sends me running to the music. I haven't lived with it long enough yet, but this album is growing on me steadily. Like *Mid Air*, it's mostly Fay's voice and a piano (with a strong band backing him up at times) and years of distilled wisdom. I won't be surprised if a year from now it's grown in my estimation but it's already a unique and noteworthy album. Plus, it's deeply religious in its way, with nods to God threaded throughout the album quietly but persistently. In a year where I didn't discover much pure gospel music, this was welcome. It's not gospel of the "Thank You, Lord" variety (though one track is called "Thank You Lord"). It's more a wide-eyed wonder over the beauty of creation, which happily encompasses this gentle reverie of an album.



**6. Johann Johannsson -- *The Miners' Hymns* (the film score of the year)**

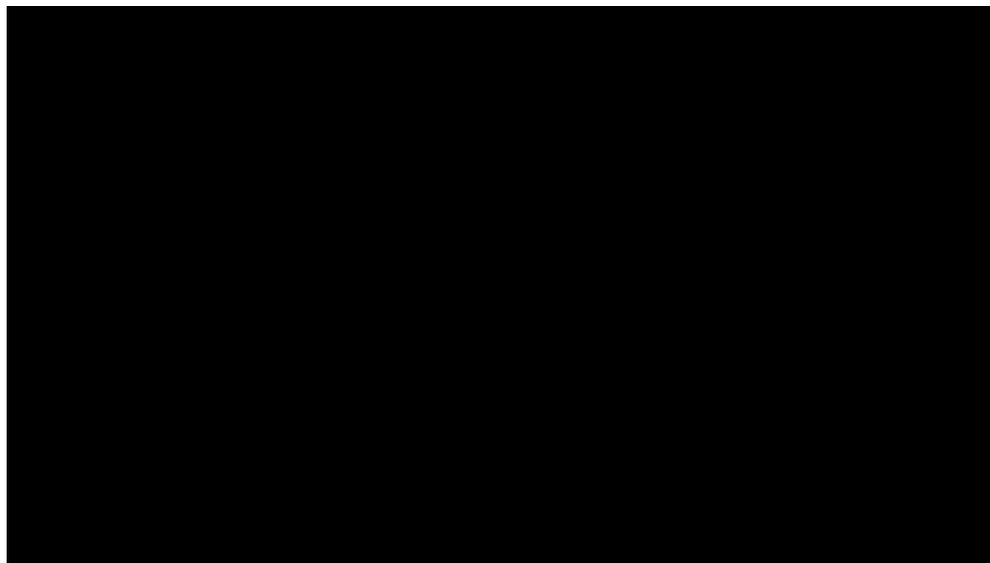
Technically, this score for the film of the same name came out in 2011. But I just discovered it and it's too good to ignore on a technicality. The film is by Bill Morrison, who has made a career out of crafting movies from found footage. His landmark work *Decasia* turned decaying film stock into a beautifully sad thing of beauty and had a killer score to match. Now comes this film, a genuine masterpiece as well. It is certainly one of the two or three best films released in the US in 2012. It uses footage from annual gathering of miners who were celebrating their union's strength. Cut together from various events over the years, it becomes an unwitting funeral for that very way of life. You needn't own a copy of *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* to appreciate the moving,

beautiful way Morrison tells a story without a single word of narration or dialogue. It's all held together by Johannsson's masterful score, a complex and stirring elegy indeed.



**7. Fiona Apple** -- *The Idler Wheel Is Wiser Than The Driver Of The Screw And Whipping Cords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do* (pop artist at peak of her powers)

I don't care if Fiona Apple's next album has a title as long as a novel, not when the pop music she's creating is this good. I'll type out every word and say, if you've been a fan of hers in the past, don't hesitate. She's at the top of her formidable game here. She may indulge herself on the titles, but everything else here is wonderfully eccentric, catchy as hell and right to the emotional point. She does what she does and it's wonderful.



**8. Jamey Johnson** -- *Living For A Dream: A Tribute To Hank Cochran* (all-star country hoedown)

He co-wrote the Patsy Cline classic "I Fall To Pieces." You could put that on your gravestone but Nashville legend Hank Cochran wrote plenty of other gems in his long career. This is nominally a Jamey Johnson album but it's filled to the bursting with guests, making this a de facto all-star tribute to a great talent. Johnson, never in better form, serving as ringleader for artists like Emmylou Harris, Elvis Costello, Willie Nelson, George Strait, Allison Krauss, Vince Gill and more. It's better than most tribute albums. I think Johnson's presence throughout gives this a cohesiveness so many other like-minded

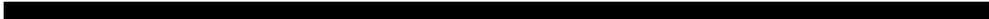
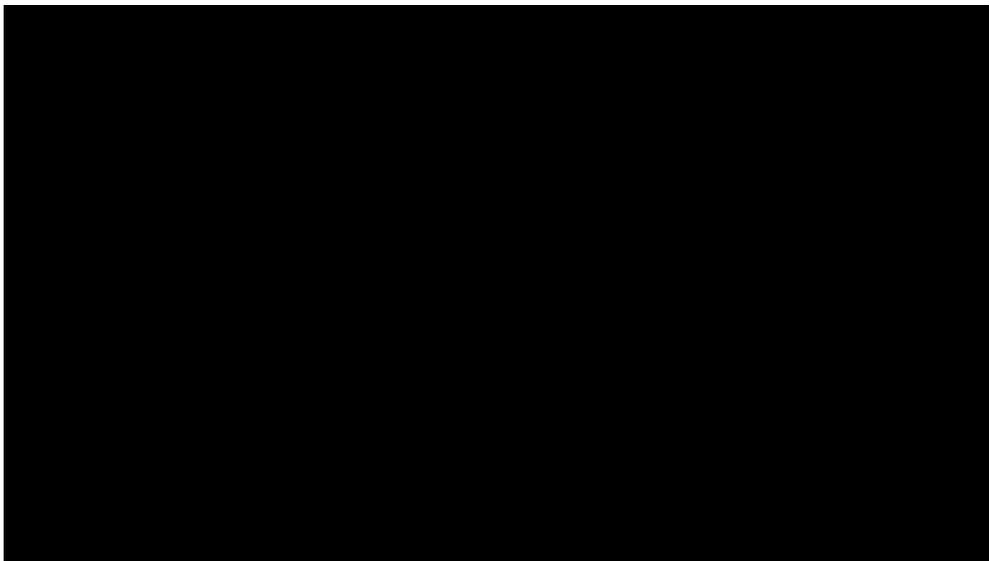
projects lack. Here's Johnson and Krauss performing the first track, "Make The World Go Away" on Letterman.

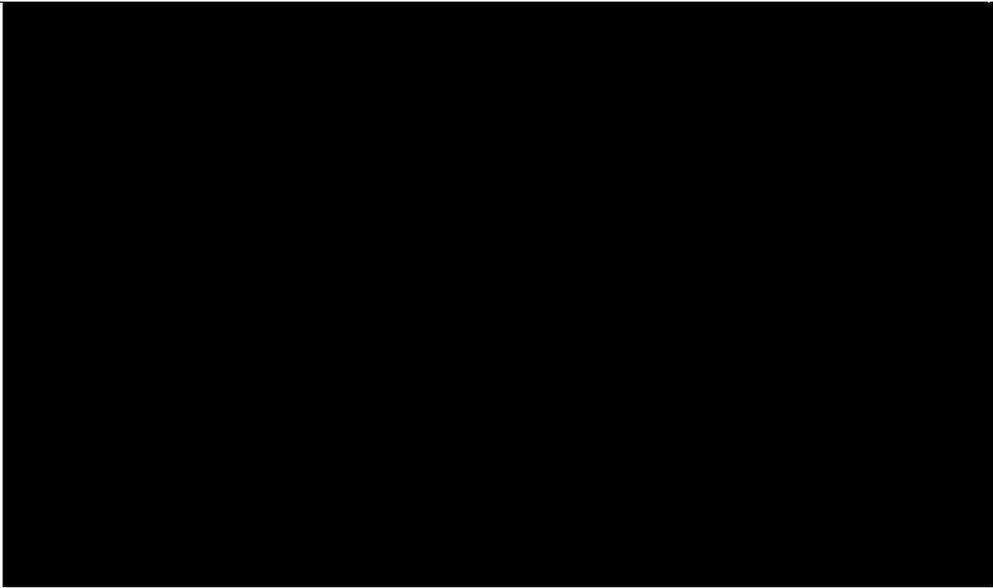


9. **Dr. John** -- *Locked Down* (triumphant New Orleans music)

**Jon Cleary** *Occapella!* (tip of the hat to Allen Toussaint)

Sometimes, with iconic artists like Dr. John that have reached the twilight of their careers, every time they release a new album it's automatically touted as a career capper, a return to glory, the best in years and so on and so forth. Well, I hope this isn't a career capper because that would mean we might not get anything this good again. But this isn't a victory lap, it's funky and locked in New Orleans jazz of the highest order. Does "Revolution" sound like a man fading away gracefully? Heck no. And when he says in an amusingly droll voice, "Let's all jut pray on it right now," that's not followed by a moment of silence, it's followed by a stirring solo that let's you know Dr. John is going to lead the revolution, given half a chance. Righteous stuff. Jon Cleary doesn't have the national profile of Dr. John but those in the know know he's a New Orleans mainstay. His new album is a tribute to the great Allen Toussaint and is as vibrant and loose and funky and free as one would hope. Sure, there's "Southern Nights" (how couldn't there be?) but he also digs up some lesser known gems. Much like Cleary himself. He plays most of the instruments most of the time, though Dr. John, Bonnie Raitt and others stop by. Irresistible. The fan video I've included is raw as can be. But the sound is great and it's fun to peek over shoulders at his piano work.





10. **Mumford And Sons** -- *Babel* (flowering of Americana)

**The Lumineers** -- *The Lumineers*

**Pigpen Theatre Co.** -- *Bremen*

**The Avett Brothers** -- *The Carpenter*

As I get older, I'm drawn instinctively more and more towards "porch music," songs that are delivered acoustically and with a folksy directness. I can still get stirred by hip-hop and that front porch can include an electric guitar (just run the cord through the window so it can be plugged into an outlet in the kitchen). But the feeling of a band, the feeling of people in a room creating music strikes a chord with me more and more. So the rise of Americana, which of course has always been with us in one form or another, is welcome indeed. Mumford And Sons have been at the commercial forefront. And they've flourished in the glow of commercial success. Their follow-up *Babel* is stronger in every respect than their debut; these guys are embracing a wider audience without ignoring the strumming heart of what they do. They're stadium ready with this widescreen album but they're taking the stage with banjo and acoustic guitars in hand. The Avett Brothers on the other hand have shied away from the spotlight a bit. Their last album *I And Love And You* had a thunderous sound (and was my favorite album of 2009). But the acclaim has spooked them a bit I think. *The Carpenter* is a little more tentative and certainly quieter. (And while the religious beliefs of certain Mumfords gets attention, *The Carpenter* has more notable religious overtones). Mumford wins this round. Following in the wake of these two excellent bands are acts like The Lumineers, who deliver a great debut in the same vein. Sure, they deserve their own attention. But if you love those two bands, this is right in your wheel house. Coming from a more offbeat angle is Pigpen, a theater troupe that has created marvelous plays filled with humor, puppetry, storytelling and excellent songs. Many of those can be found on this album mixed with some originals and they have a confidence and distinctive lyricism that should win this band/troupe a much wider audience. See their theatrical productions; see them perform as a band on tour; or for heaven's sake buy their album.

Mumford And Sons "I Will Wait"

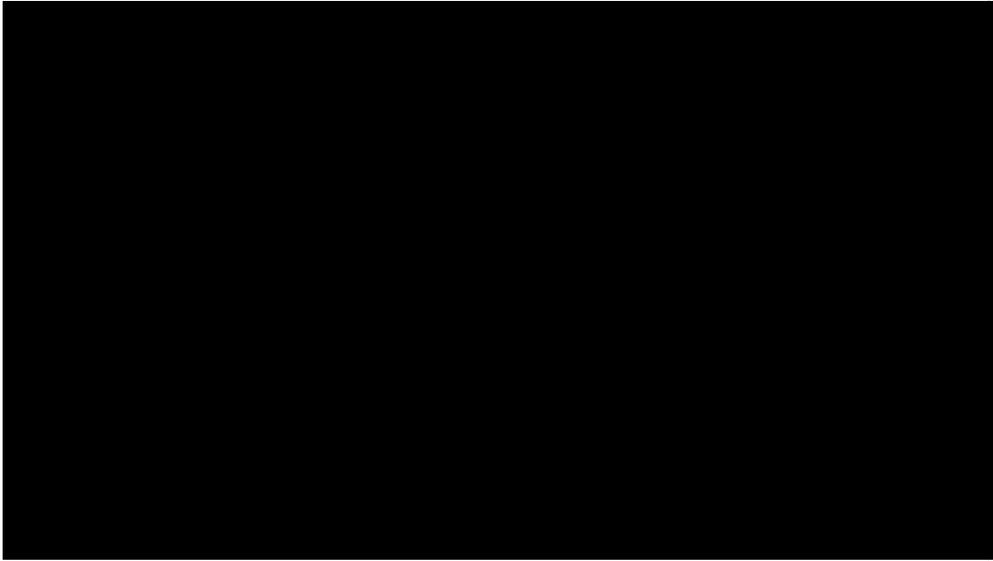




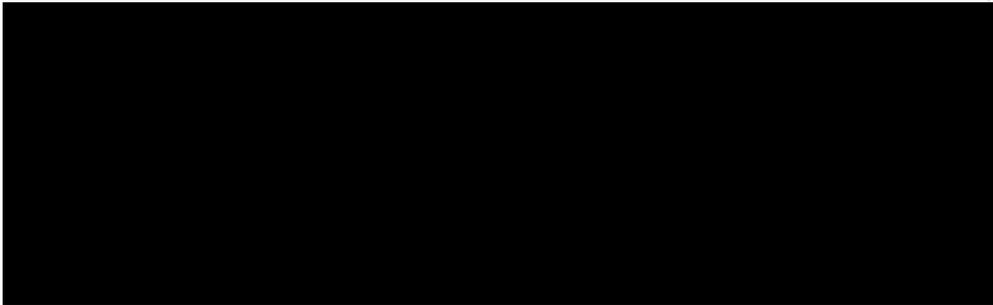
The Avett Brothers "Live And Die"



The Lumineers "Stubborn Love"



Pigpen Theatre Co. "Bremen" (Watch this for a glimpse of their theatrical magic as well)





11. **Kasey Chambers And Shane Nicholson** -- *Wreck And Ruin* (world class folk-country-blues)

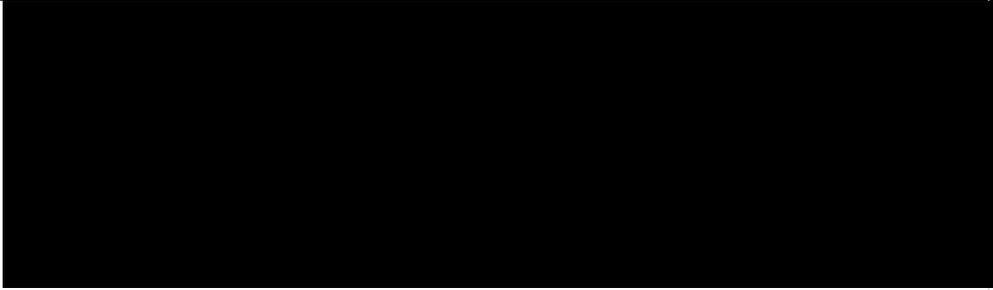
Both acts have terrific solo work, but this husband and wife team from Australia is one of the best male/female country duos in a long, long time. Their first album together -- Rattlin' Bones -- just blew me away. This follow-up is just as good, filled with vivid numbers drawing on folk and country and blues for a...well, a bone-rattlin' hoedown that is infectious and moving and just plain fun. Did you buy *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Buy this.



12. **Nas** -- *Life Is Good* (rap for grown ups)

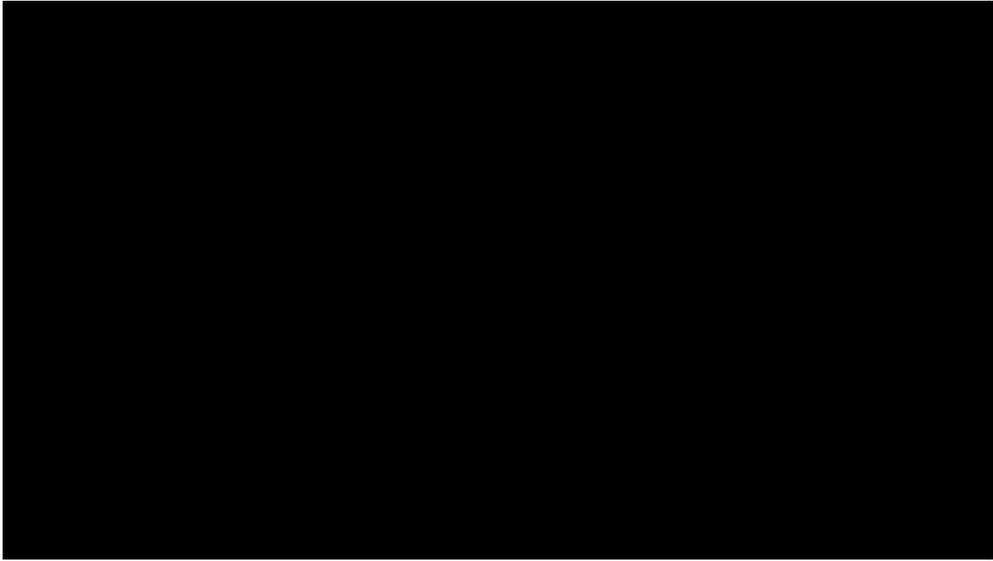
Nas has always understood that honesty is more powerful and strong than boasting, though he can do his share of boasting too. You won't find Killer Mike on my list; gangsta rap that can't see beyond braggadocio doesn't interest me anymore. Here Nas raps with all the fervent skill he's always possessed, ripping apart the competition while making it cool to worry about his teenage daughter. This is just about as good as Nas at his best and that's as good as rap gets. Okay, I'm not street but I'm not a farmer either. That doesn't stop me from loving good rap or good country. "Daughters" is a classic, a perfect intro for those who don't usually delve into this genre. just try not to nod your head while listening.





13. **Leonard Cohen** -- *Old Ideas* (magisterial pop)

What a great second wind the great Leonard Cohen is enjoying. Financial travails brought him down from the mountain and out onto the road where this cool figure embraced the massive audience that had been waiting for him all these years. His craggy, Grand Canyon of a voice had deepened even more, but Cohen delivered his portfolio of classic tunes with majesty and appealing, witty reserve. Now we get this great, autumnal gem. He's pared away the unessential. But the result isn't austere and cold; it's as tuneful and rich as ever. Just older and wiser, a second flowering. Maybe it's been a while since you've purchased a Leonard Cohen album. It shouldn't be.

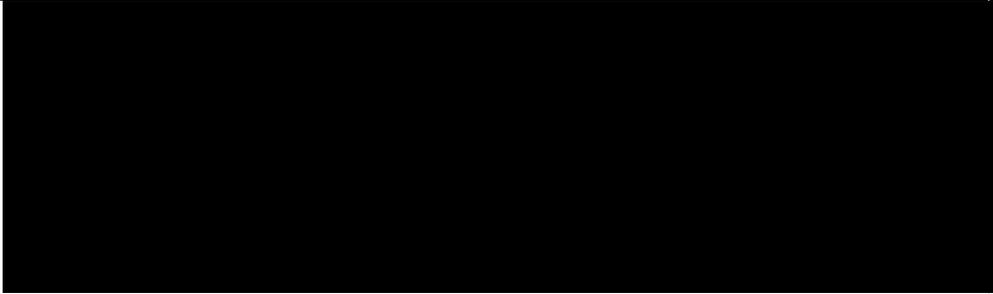


14. **Josephine** -- *Portrait* (two English lasses with talent to burn)

**Lianna La Havas** -- *Is Your Love Big Enough*

The marvelous Corinne Bailey Rae threw down the gauntlet, embracing pop and soul and rock with aplomb on her brilliant debut. That gauntlet has been snapped up by a handful of talented artists, led by Josephine (who leans towards the full-bodied soul) and Lianna (who is a bit more folksy). Both feel like genuine artists right off the mark. These are the sort of debuts that leave you tapping your toes, waiting for them to come to town in concert or release a new album right away. Nina Simone, Maxwell, Erykah Badu, Phoebe Snow, Bill Withers, Joni Mitchell - take your pick of excellent influences you can spot here. Can't wait for more.





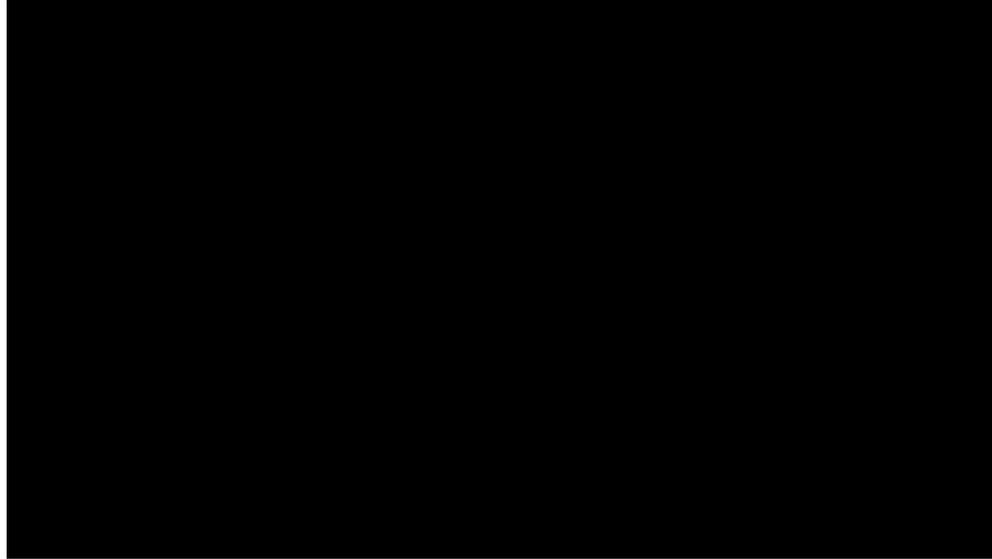
15. **Grant-Lee Phillips** -- *Walking In The Green Corn* (acoustic gem)

What a pleasure. After fronting the excellent band Grant Lee Buffalo, Phillips finally disbanded if after label support never matched the critical acclaim of the group. As a solo artist, he turned to a more acoustic sound, one that's grown richer and more assured with each release. His latest was funded in part by fans, the sort of communal support you read about but don't always see happening in practice for the acts that deserve it most. It's a lovely work. If you've lost track of him over the years, now is as good a time as any to listen again. He hasn't been waiting for you; he's gone ahead. Here's hoping you catch up.



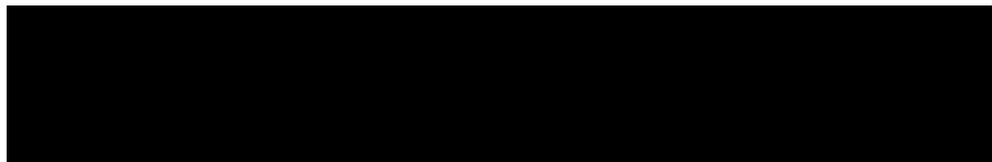
16. **Antibalas** -- *Antibalas* (Fela Kuti lives!)

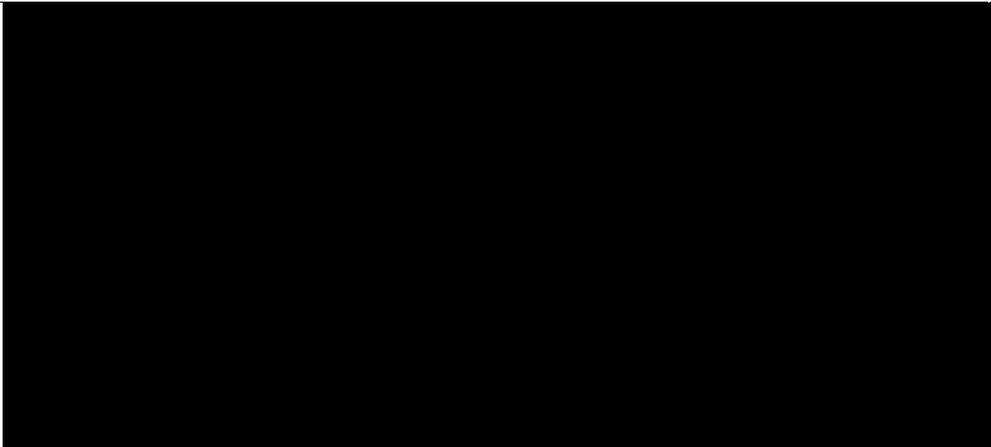
Honestly, I get so much music handed to me by labels or make impulsive buys based on a rave review that half the time I forget why I've bought an album. But they all go on my phone (yep, it's 2013) and every once in a while I'll start to listen to an artist without the foggiest idea of who they are. That was certainly the case with Antibalas. The first track began and I was immediately intrigued. Was this some archival album, a compilation of some world music act I'd never heard of before? You can't help but have an open mind when you don't know the first damn thing about an album. All I knew was that I loved it. Turns out Antibalas is a new act from Brooklyn of all places, a group devoted in part to the music and spirit of Fela Kuti. Mission accomplished. This album was recorded for Daptone Records, the home of the great Sharon Jones and a host of other acts that love classic music genres but play them with the ferocity and passion of the new, not as some musty work of revivalism. It's a perfect fit for this band. To top it off, the music video for "Dirty Money" is clever enough to make me enjoy music videos again.



**17. Iris Dement -- *Sing The Delta* (comeback of the year)**  
**Boo Hanks with Don Flemons -- *Buffalo Junction***

What the heck happened to Iris Dement? I'd been wondering that for years. This little gal with a huge, rustic voice that could shake mountains and sounded like it was living back in the 1920s blew me and everyone else away when she broke through with *My Life* and its instant classic of a tune "Sweet Is The Melody." (I still sing that one, poorly, all the time.) Her next album was political in nature and proved, unfortunately, how few artists outside of Dylan can create enduring tunes that are overtly political. And then...nothing. Turns out she made an album of gospel covers I missed. But essentially it's been 16 years between albums of new music for her. Why? She just wasn't ready, or to be exact she felt the songs weren't ready. They are now because *Sings The Delta* picks up right where she left off, delivering pure, coal country, mountain music of a variety so pure it makes most Nashville product sound like Carly Rae Jepsen. Remarkably, it's been worth the wait. I haven't been waiting for a new album from Boo Hanks because frankly I'd never heard of this bluesman. Heck, his debut album came out when he was 79 years old, which has to be close to a record. Now he's collaborating with Dom Flemons of the terrific group *Carolina Chocolate Drops* and Hanks' second album is a low-key, witty and tuneful delight. Thirteen songs under 30 minutes and it's both just right and over way too soon. His video (a fan's bootleg, I think) starts just as the song does and it's pretty raw but gives you a sense of his playful style. [Here's a fine No Depression feature telling his story.](#)

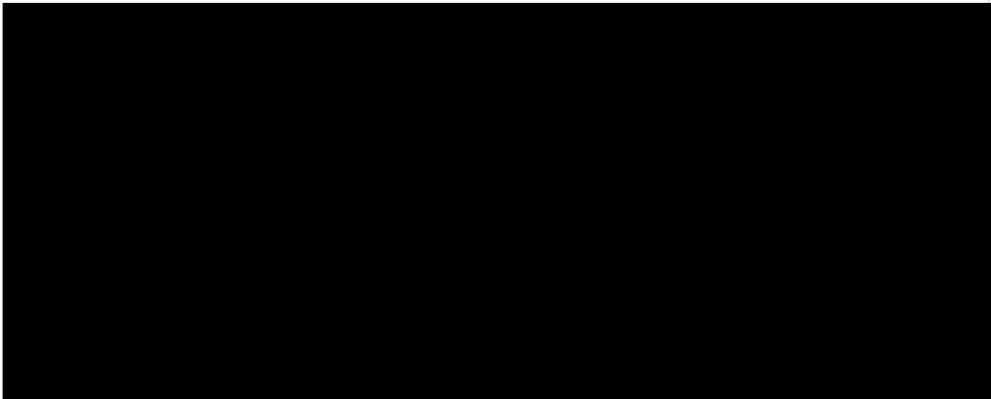


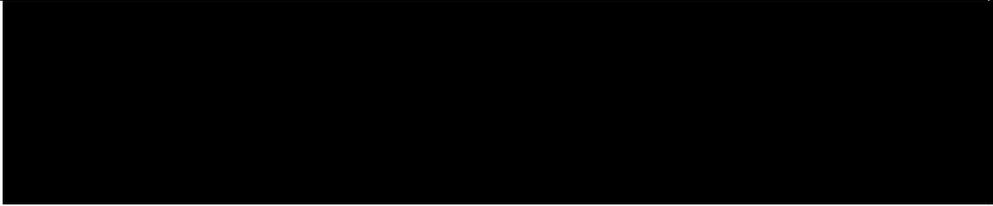


18. **Vijay Iyer Trio** -- *Accelerando* (jazz piano)

**Brad Mehldau** -- *Where Do You Start/Ode*

I suppose jazz long ago became the realm of the wealthy and obsessive aficionados. The clubs that show the top acts are very expensive and usually offer short sets at high prices. Or you head to even more expensive venues like Lincoln Center. It's a pity since jazz at its best is popular music. But it won't rustify as long as artists like Vijay Iyer and Brad Mehldau are around to deliver. Iyer's album is a probing affair that takes a few listens to sink in. Mehldau shows off both sides of his talent with two albums. The first contains his usual wide-ranging covers while the second is all originals. You wouldn't want to give up either, but here I'll give the edge to the originals. The Branford Marsalis is for the unconverted; these are for the believers.

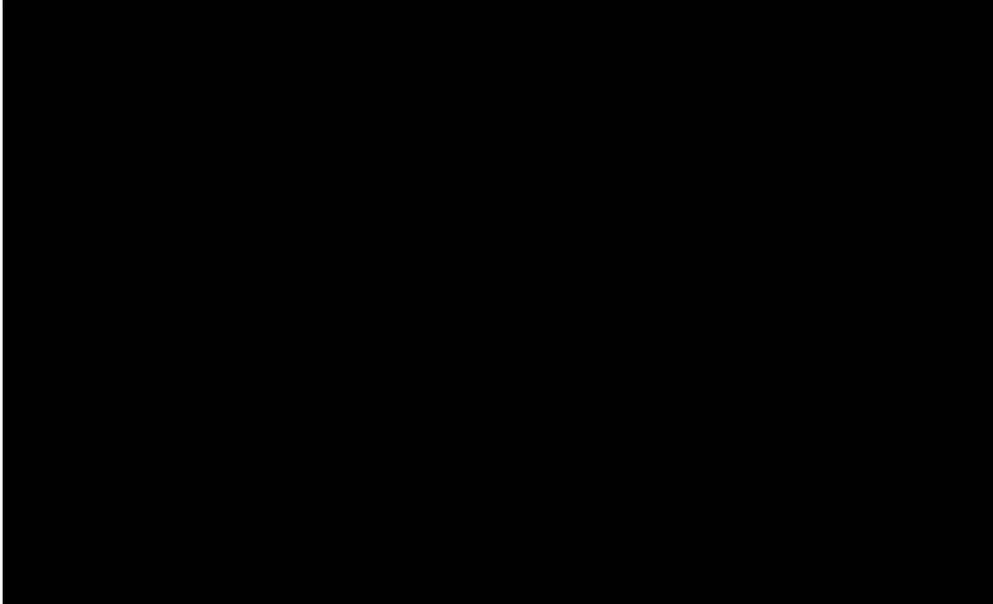




19. **The Hives** -- *Lex Hives* (rock, by god)

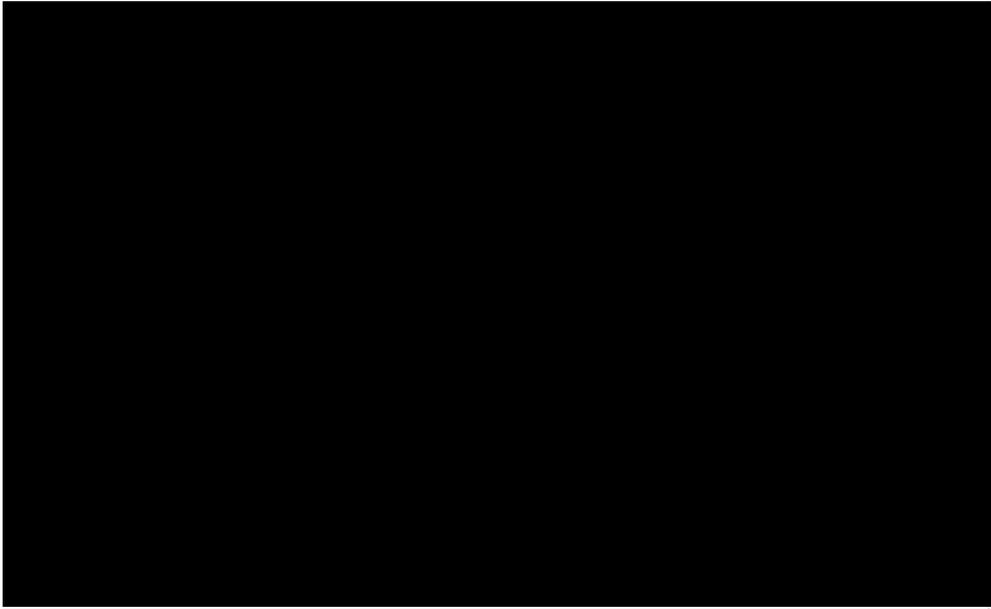
**Japandroid** -- *Celebration Rock*

**The Doughboys** -- *Shakin' Our Souls*



The Hives are so good live and bursting with such confidence that it confuses me sometime. Do these guys fill stadiums? Have they sold millions of copies of their albums? They sure look like they have and their music sure as hell deserves to do so. It's been five years since their last album and they don't miss a trick, delivering a collection of songs that builds catchy songs out of the barest of essentials (a hand clap, a brief phrase like "Come on!" repeated over and over, etc.) and making it uproariously fun. They know they're the biggest band of the world, even if we don't know it yet. Japandroids from Canada also know how to rock and their second album shows them growing by leaps and bounds. Sure, the Ramones would have released seven albums in the last four years, but at least they're making sure they get it right. Maybe both groups took notes on The Doughboys. These garage rockers from Jersey took their own sweet time. They flirted with fame in the 1960s, broke up and reunited for a laugh in 2000. This time it stuck and they've finally recorded sporadically. Their new album may be their best and no wonder Steven Van Zandt is a fan -- they sound as hungry and ready to go as any kids on their first go-round. Great stuff.



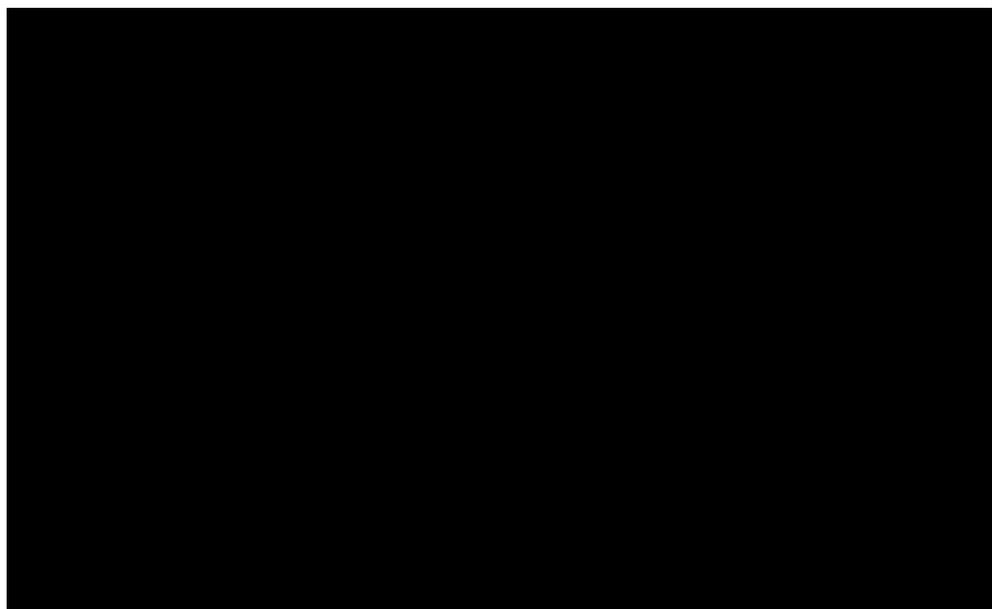
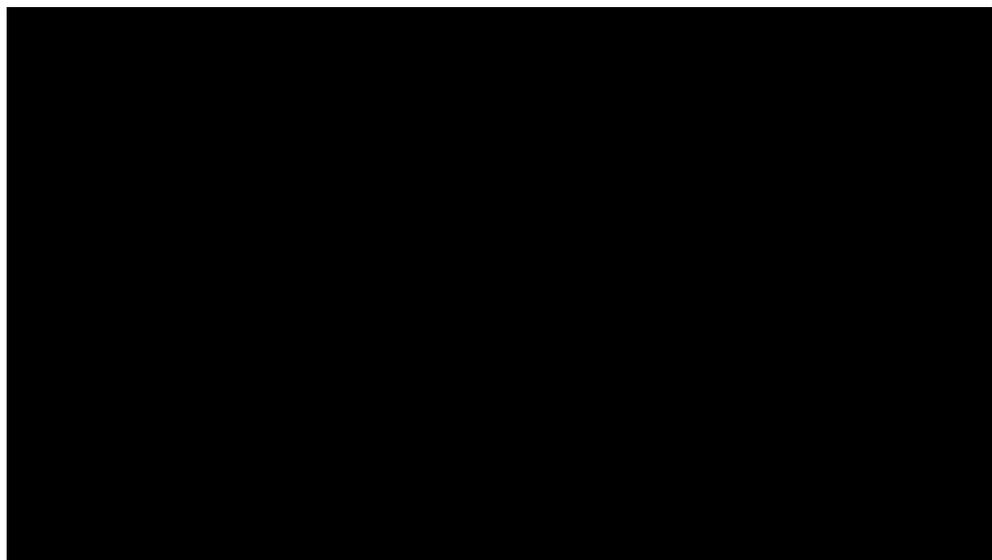


20. **Bruce Springsteen** -- *Wrecking Ball* (life in them old dogs yet)

**Bob Dylan** -- *Tempest*

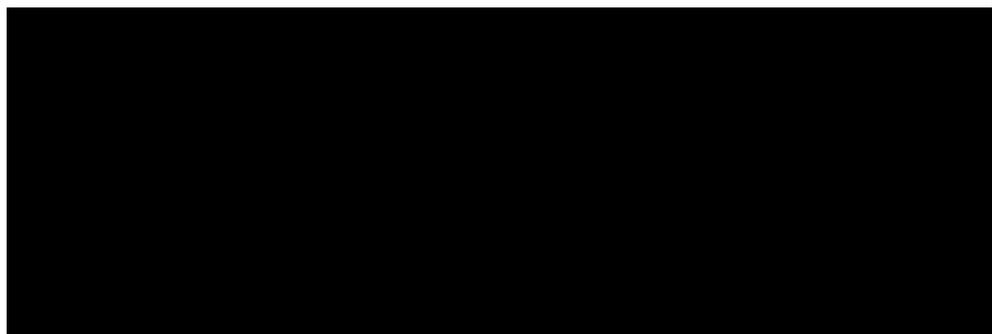
I'm a huge fan of Bruce Springsteen. But I haven't placed a Springsteen album of new material on my best of the year list since *Tunnel Of Love*. He's a great artist and almost every album has added at least a few new worthy songs to his catalog. But there's no question the early 1970s to the late 1980s were his peak years as a songwriter. His tribute to Pete Seeger was a revelation, however, and that barn-burning collection of covers pointed a way forward for him. He's finally capitalized on that breakthrough with *Wrecking Ball*, which combines the musical richness of that album with fiery lyrics as impassioned as anything he's done since *Nebraska* and *Born In The USA*. And for the same reasons: nothing gets his ire up like a vicious economic downturn. Hard times suit him. Dylan, on the other hand, has had his valleys like anyone. But he's delivered great albums all throughout his career, a rarity in any area of the arts. *Tempest* shoots itself in the foot at the end, delivering its longest and least-interesting tracks as a finale. But the first seven or eight are just terrific, nimble and clever and rich. They'll be great live material for years to come. I can even enjoy "Tempest," even though as one wag put it this

tune about the Titanic with its 87 verses seems designed solely to become the one Dylan song that almost can't be covered by anyone else. Ever.



21. **Chris Smither** -- *Hundred Dollar Valentine* (blues master)

I've got a lot of catching up to do with this journeyman blues talent, long championed by Bonnie Raitt as a world class songwriter. If you need proof of what a great ear Raitt has, just check out this album. Apparently, he's been his own worst enemy for many years. But Smither has been productive for many years now. It's all come together here, the first album of all original songs in his four decades of writing and singing and playing. Here's the title track.

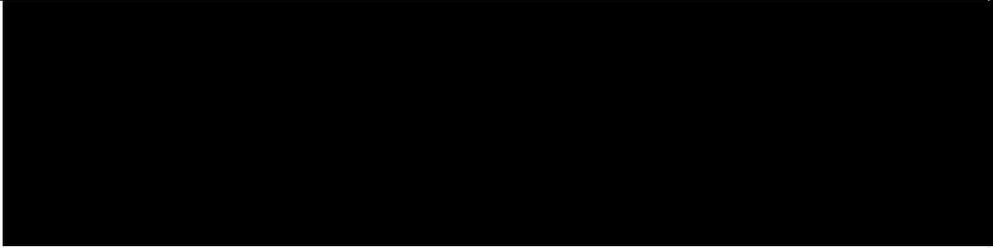


22. **Diana Krall** -- *Glad Rag Doll* (digging deeper jazz talent)

Diana Krall is an intriguing talent. She's always been taken seriously as a jazz musician, despite her striking good looks. Still, I sometimes felt she overcompensated, trying to downplay her singing in favor of proving her jazz chops on occasion, treating vocals like a lesser evil of sorts. That stopped for good when she accepted the challenge of recording with strings (arranged by Claus Ogerman. He's been involved with her best work, back in 2001 with her hit *The Look Of Love* and then again on 2009's *Quiet Nights*. I think her work with him has allowed her to loosen up and find strength in her voice. She finds just the right balance on this delightfully loose album produced by T Bone Burnett and including mostly covers of tunes from the 1920s and 1930s drawn from her father's collection of 78s.

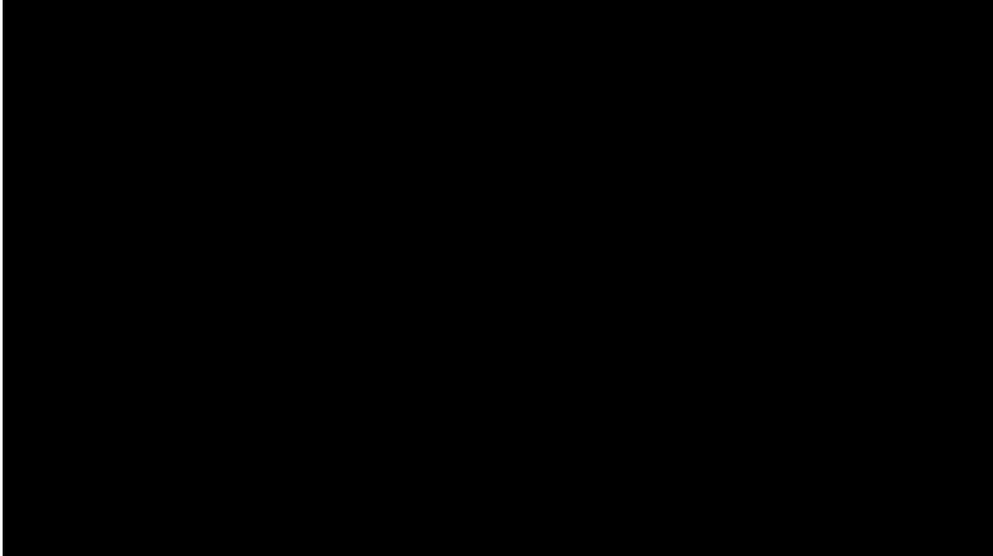
23. **Ed Sheeran** -- *+* (thoughtful British pop)

A talented British lad, Ed Sheeran recorded an EP that caught the ear of both Jamie Foxx and Elton John. Since then he's released a debut album that was a smash hit in the UK, co-written a song for boy band One Direction, toured with Taylor Swift and appeared on her latest album and so on and so forth. So the surprise is how mature and not poppy as such his debut sounds. He'll be duetting with Elton John at the Grammys I'll bet and it should be a highlight of the evening. When everyone rushes out to buy his album, they won't be disappointed.



24. **Kendrick Lamar** -- *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (rap smarts)

This is the rap breakthrough of the year. Happily, it's for an artist that doesn't celebrate violence or pretend he's harder than everyone else. Instead Lamar voices fear and insecurity, along with the rush of pleasures that life can offer as well. His preacher man voice on one track ("Martin had a dream! Martin had a dream! KENDRICK has a dream!") is hilarious and his insightful, vivid tracks are broken by the typical bits of comedy that are untypically funny. I've no reason to think this but I suspect he might prove a good actor, or at least a good guest on *Saturday Night Live*. Happily the hype has been completely justified this time.



25. **Melody Gardot** -- *The Absence* (singular voice heads to Brazil)

Melody Gardot has traveled an unexpected path to music (mainly stemming from a devastating accident, after which playing music was the only time she didn't feel pain). But her three albums have proven consistently strong. *The Absence* may be globe-trotting and draw inspiration from Brazil to Buenos Aires and beyond. But it's essentially true to her gift for strong melodies and a quiet, inviting aura. An excellent follow-up to *My One And Only Thrill*.



26. **Father John Misty** -- *Fear Fun* (Fleet Foxes redux, in a good way)

**Damien Jurado** -- *Maraqopa*

**Lord Huron** -- *Impossible Dreams*

**Boy And Bear** -- *Moonfire*

Sometimes popular music is like mining for gold. Someone strikes a rich vein and then you've got yourself a gold rush. Fleet Foxes and My Morning Jacket may have helped pioneer a spacey, modern spin on Crosby, Stills & Nash mixed with modern arrangements. But that sound -- you know it when you hear it -- is offering up treasure to a lot of acts. Father John Misty is a spinoff from Fleet Foxes, Damien Jurado is enjoying a fruitful collaboration with producer Richard Swift (a miner in the tunnels of popular music himself), Lord Huron is a wanderer who came to music via painting and Boy And Bear are Australians who delivered *Moonfire* in 2011; it just took a while for their gems to make it to these shores and my attention. Sure, some of these acts will have proven to be riding on the coattails of what others discovered and the veins they've jumped a claim on will soon run dry. That doesn't make what they've mined any less appealing. And some will surely show a gift for expanding on this initial burst of inspiration. Hey, MMJ can't seem to be bothered with this path anymore, so someone should explore it.

Father John Misty "Hollywood Forever Cemetery Sings"

Damien Jurado "Museum Of Flight"



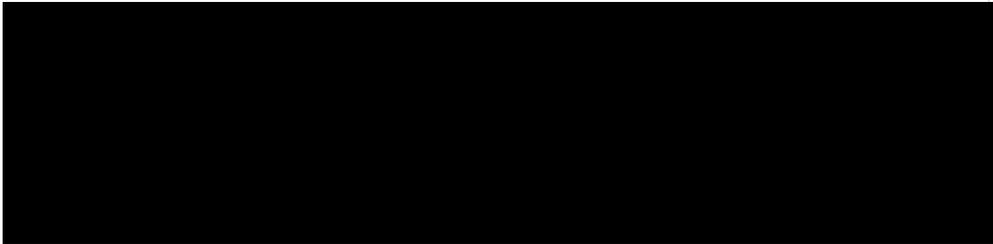
Lord Huron "Time To Run"

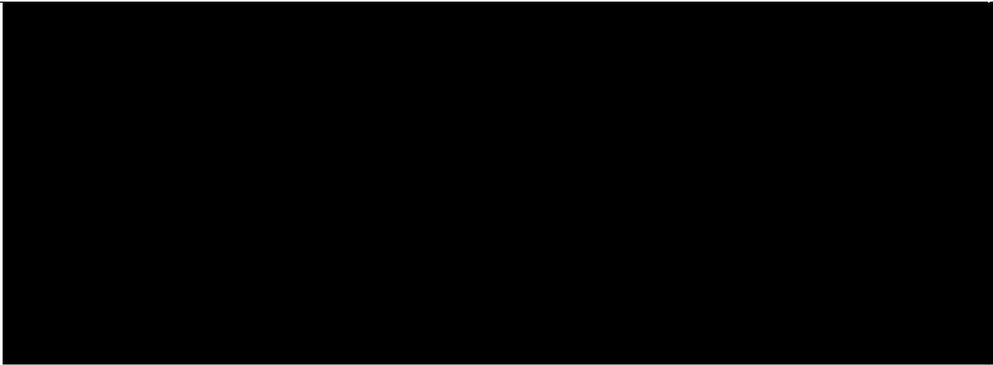


Boy And Bear "Feeding Line"

**27. The Time Jumpers** -- *The Time Jumpers* (Western swing)

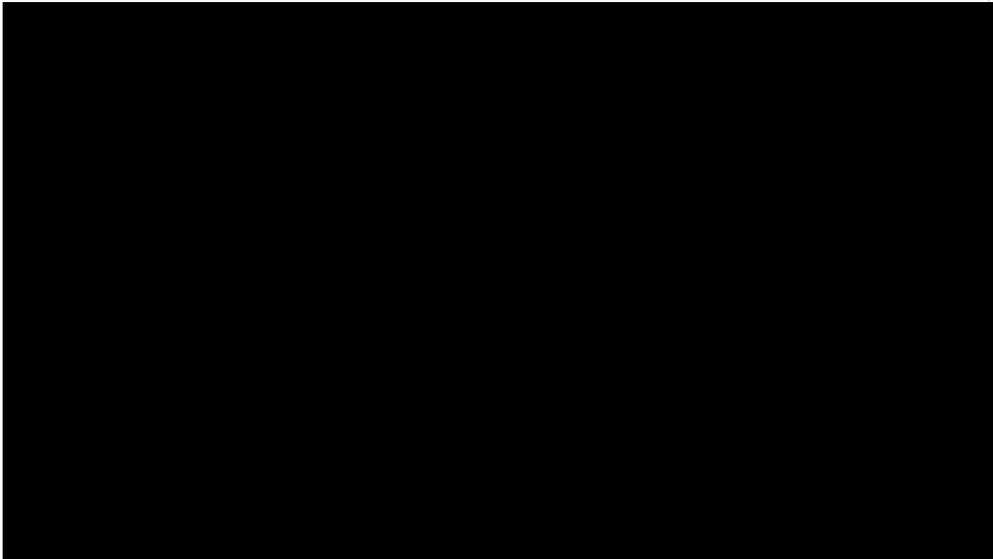
A Nashville institution, The Time Jumpers are a collective of sorts that has been performing Western swing since the late 1990s. They finally released a live album in 2007 to great acclaim. But this is their first studio album. It's sheer pleasure, with Vince Gill rejoining the group for the album, apparently a homecoming of sorts.





28. **Neil Young And Crazy Horse** -- *Psychedelic Pill/Americana* (still kicking, still stinging)

Neil Young released two albums this year, not to mention a Jonathan Demme concert film for his recent excellent album *Le Noize* (an intended acoustic affair that got noisier and louder than expected). *Americana* is a head-turning collection of covers and *Psychedelic Pill* is another fuzzy, loud, stomping collaboration with Crazy Horse. He's irascible, he's a tinkerer (hey Neil, exactly how big are the music files for your new digital standard? I love high quality but will each song need a terrabyte to meet your standards), he's a writer but most of all he's a musician of remarkable consistency. Especially for one so musically restless.

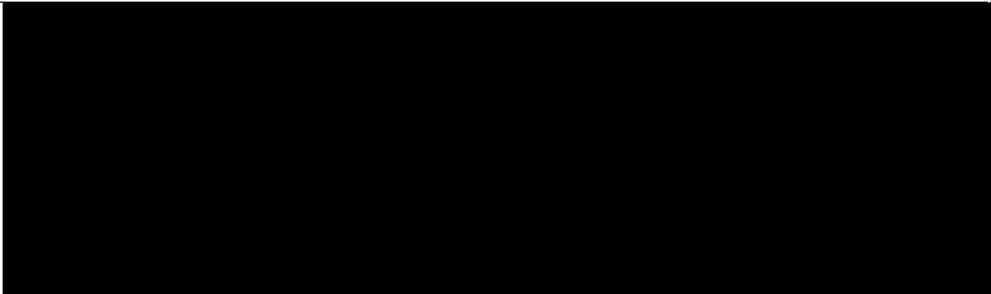
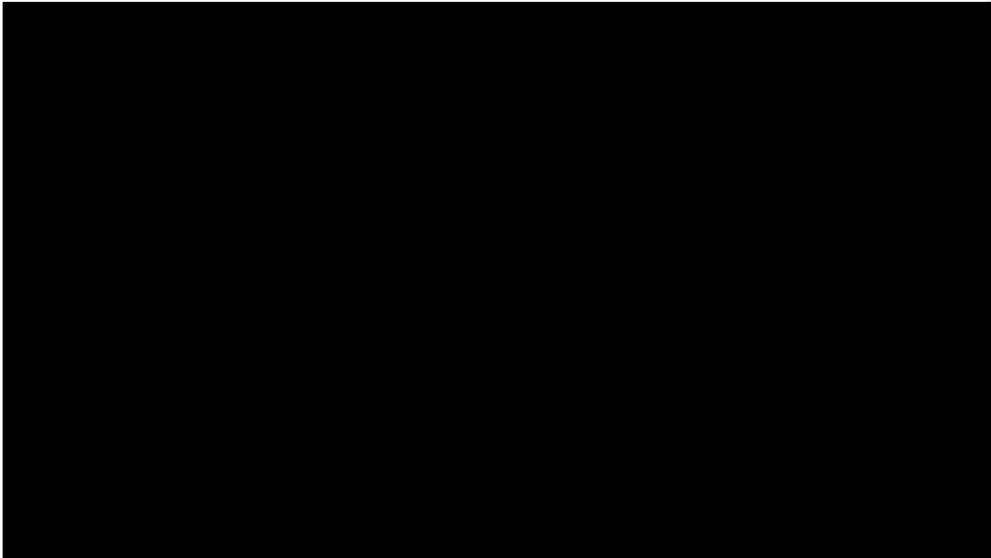


29. **Michael Kiwanuka** -- *Home Again* (70s soul circa Bill Withers)  
**Miguel** -- *Kaleidoscope Dream* (70s soul circa Marvin Gaye)

A British act whose debut album is mature, accessible and sure to improve with time. One more reason to always pay attention to the [BBC's Sound Of... poll](#). (He won it in January of 2012.)

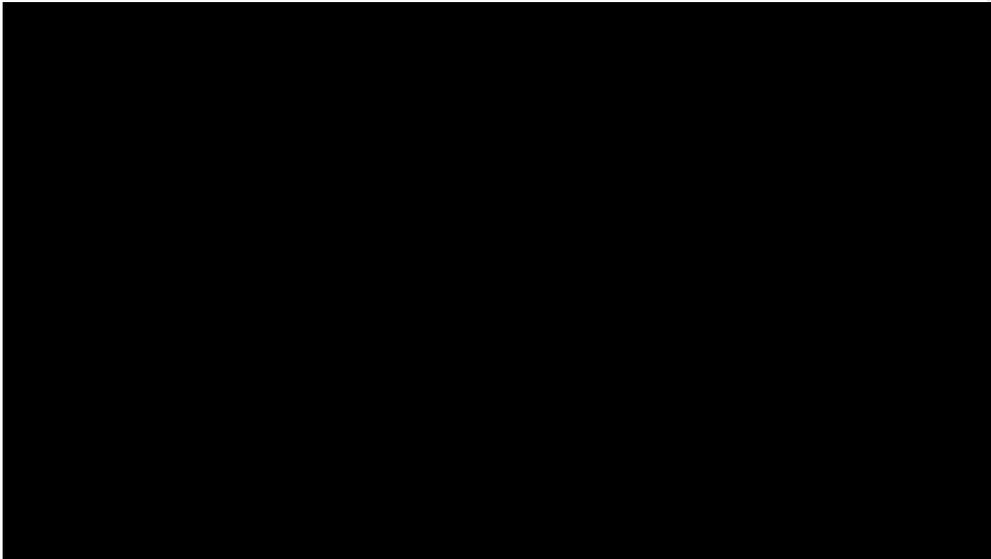
"Adorn" is the killer here from Miguel. But this is sexy, soulful stuff. Here's hoping success will suit Miguel and he'll get even better.



30. **Bettye LaVette** -- *Thankful N' Thoughtful* (soul survivor)

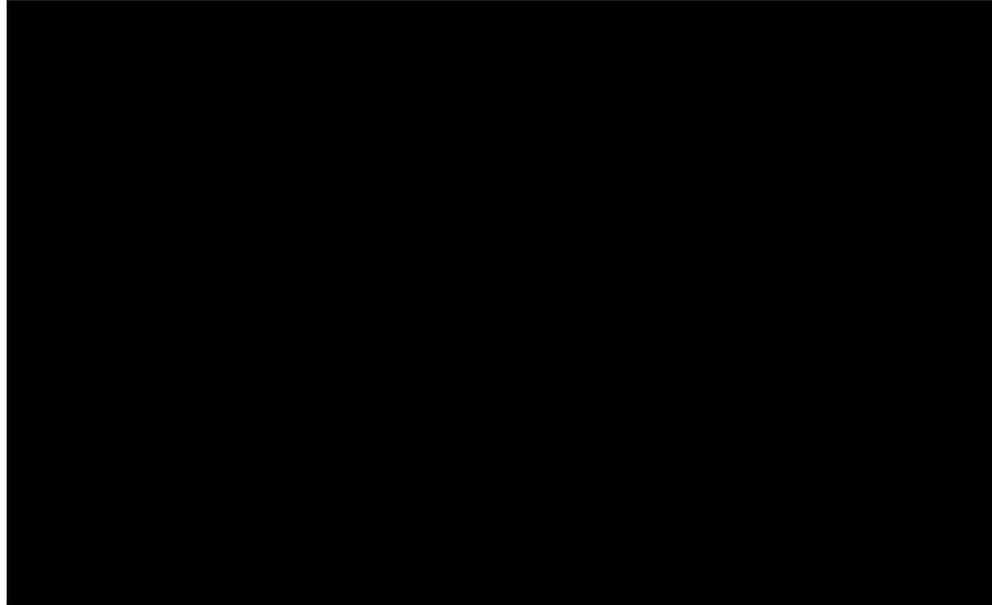
Like Shirley Horn, this artist waited until late in her career before receiving the attention her talent deserved. But the time was well spent, deepening her skills and preparing her to make the most of the opportunity. This may be her best album since the breakthrough *I've Got My Own Hell To Raise*.



31. **Various Artists** -- *Mercyland: Hymns For The Rest Of Us* (church music for those who don't go to church and some who do)

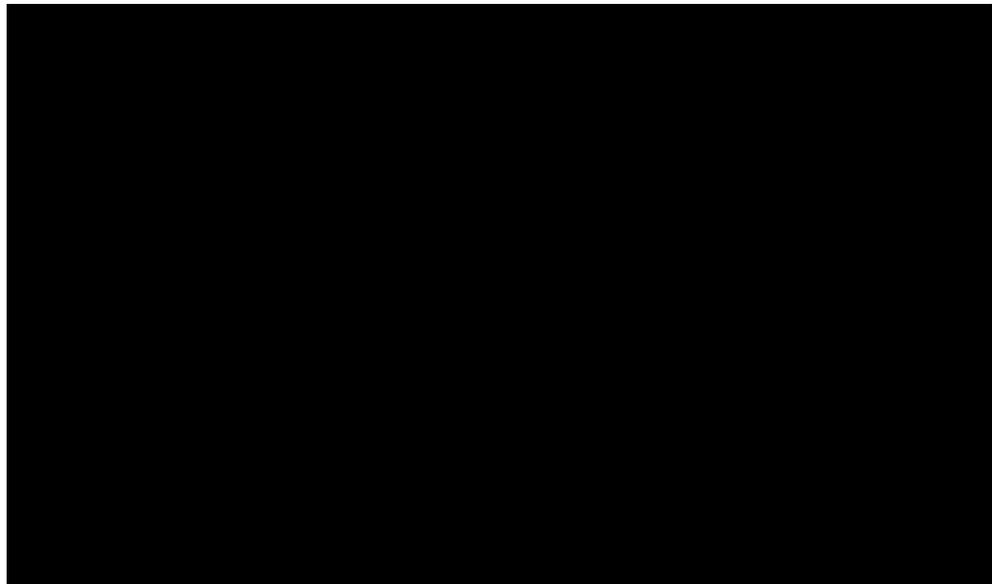
Producer Phil Madeira wanted to show the ties that bind all the major religions of the world. So he developed *Mercyland: Hymns For The Rest Of Us*, a collection of country, folk, blues and other artists delivering songs of faith with a twist. I love the song below, in

which Shawn Mullins sings, "God don't hate the Muslims/ God don't hate the Jews/ God don't hate the Christians/ But we all give God the blues." Not every song is droll; many are just simple testaments of faith. And the acts are sterling, from Carolina Chocolate Drops to Emmylou Harris, The Civil Wars and many more. It contains two traditionals, which fit snugly alongside new tunes like "Leaning On You" and "Lights In The Valley." Can I get an amen?



**32. Billy Bragg And Wilco -- *Mermaid Avenue Volume 3* unexpected gem from vault)**

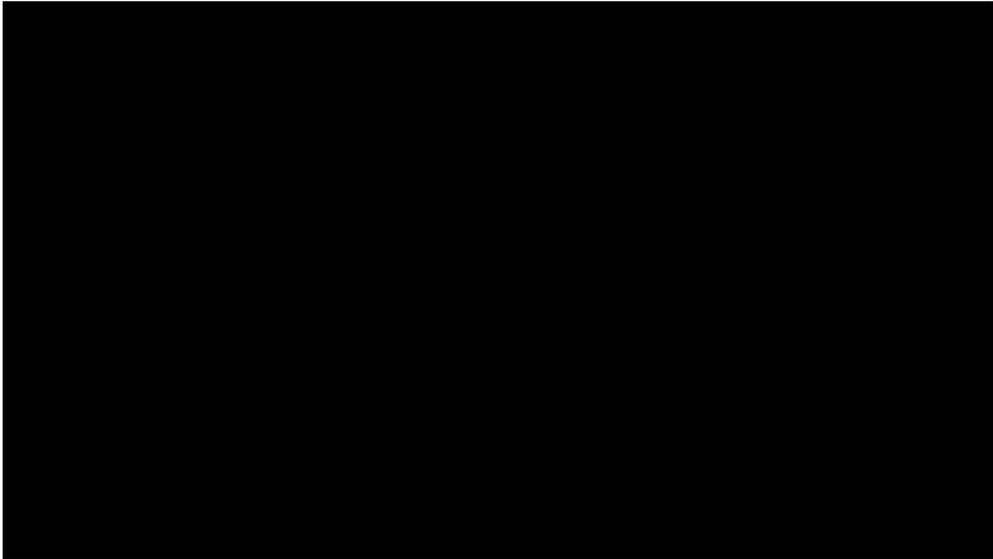
This album doesn't even really exist on CD (just as a digital download) but it's still one of the best of the year. Billy Bragg and Wilco were given a cache of Woody Guthrie lyrics to set to music. The result was *Mermaid Avenue* Volumes 1 and 2. Each one was among the best of their years way back in 1998 and 2000. Now all these years later, a boxed set with both albums and 17 extra tracks has come out. *Mermaid Avenue: The Complete Sessions* is the name of it. Even if you own the first two albums already, it's only \$30 at Amazon and it's worth it to get those two and what amounts to an entire extra album. Or you can just get the download of the 17 new tracks. These aren't the cast-offs or tracks that didn't quite work. By and large, they're new tunes just as strong as the ones we've heard. God knows why they didn't come out a decade ago. An unexpected treat. I couldn't find any of the new songs online so here's a gem from the earlier sets.



33. **Regina Spektor** -- *What We Saw From The Cheap Seats* (quirky pop)

**Norah Jones** -- *Little Broken Hearts* (leaving jazz behind)

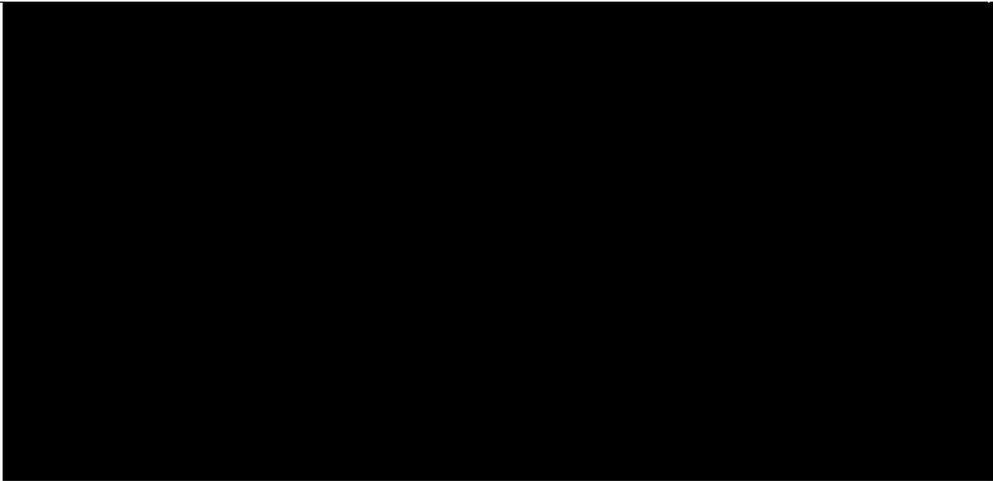
So many female acts seem to have a hiccup in their singing these days; it must drive Regina Spektor. But she keeps following the beat of her own eccentric drummer. Chart dominance has escaped her, but her pop sense and quirky lyrics are serving her well. Meanwhile, Norah Jones sort of lost her way for a while. But embracing pop has pushed her to embrace stronger melodies again as well; this is a return to form.



34. **Jack White** -- *Blunderbuss* (eclectic; electric)

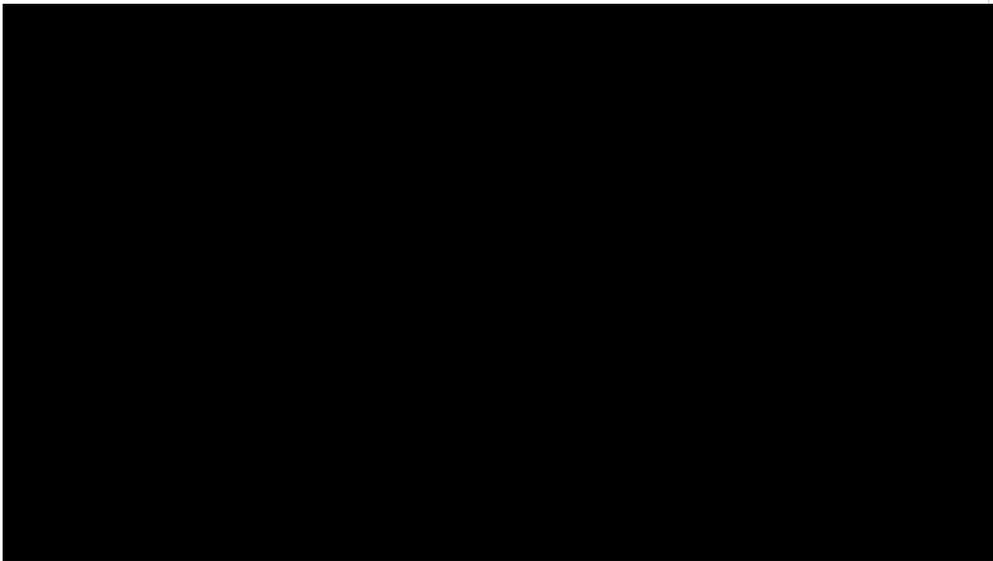
He may have multiple side projects, movie soundtracks, producing gigs and now official solo albums. I still miss White Stripes, especially since I never got to see them in concert. Blunderbuss feels a little unfocused to me, as if Jack White weren't exactly clear what his musical identity is meant to be without the conceit of a band. Still, song for song it's muscular fun, though the "Love Is Blindness" cover is both good and yet somehow more suited to a B side or live show. I do love this video, where Jack looks like he's auditioning for *Edward Scissorhands*.





35. **Tame Impala** -- *Lonerism* (psychedelica redefined)

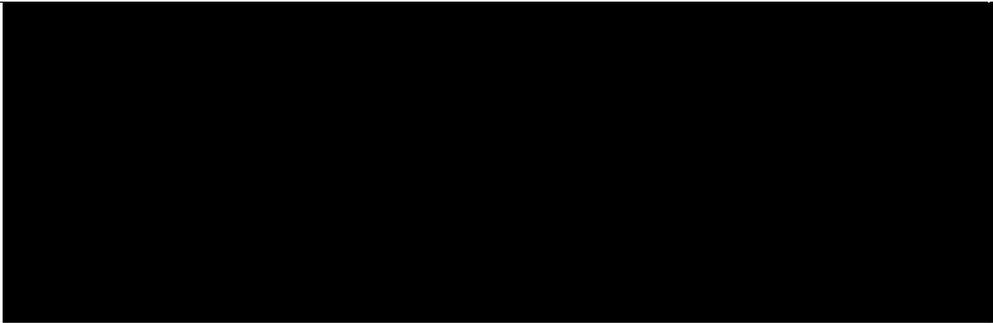
Psychedelic rock and yet another winner from Down Under. Retro but not, if you know what I mean.



36. **Green Day** -- *Uno!//Dos!//Tres!* (purging punk pop)

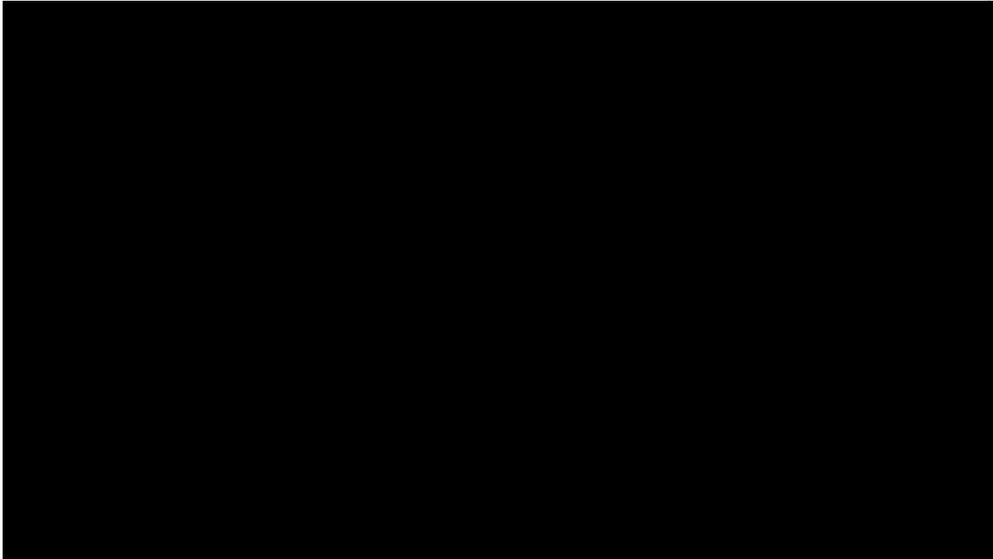
After their weighty concept albums, Green Day have cleaned out their system by releasing not one, not two but three albums of spiky punk pop. The natural inclination is to immediately complain: why didn't they just release one great album with the best 14 songs? But both *Uno!* and *Dos!* are pretty much filler free and putting out all three feels like a nutty, freeing sort of gesture in and of itself. Fans seemed freaked out by the idea: even if you add up all their sales, it's less than 500,000 copies and the lowest total of their career. But then, *21st Century Breakdown* did remarkably (and unfairly) little in terms of album sales. It's a pity since they've influenced so many and still have the goods. I guess it's hard to maintain street cred when the last street you were on was Broadway. It's your loss, fans.





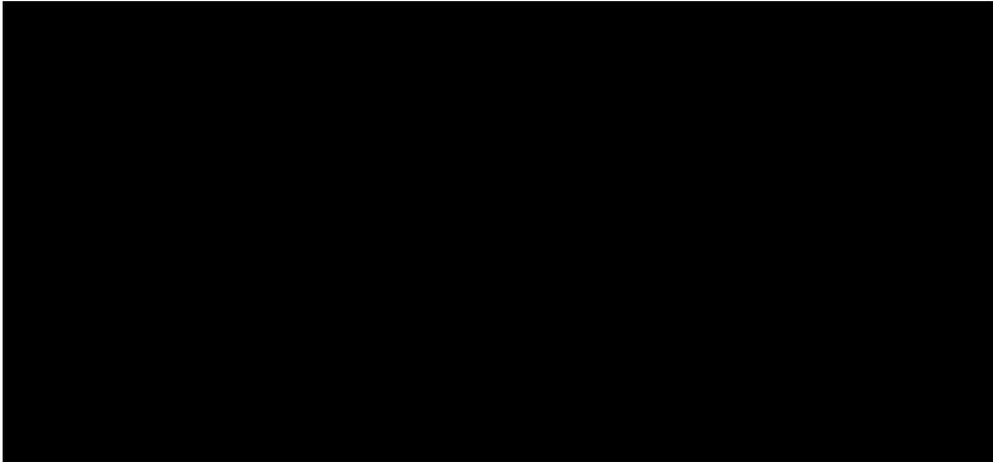
37. **Brandi Carlile** -- *Bear Creek* (an indie voice in the wilderness)

Let me be honest. When I'm getting ready to do my best of the year list, I play catch up by surfing through all the other lists I can find and checking out artists that sound intriguing. That's how I stumbled on Brandi Carlile. If I'd been able to spend more time with it, this album might well rank higher. Obviously, others have been fans of her for years but she was a terrific find, an act I can't wait to see in concert but which already has a back catalog to explore. Hell, she's so cool Kris Kristofferson appears in her music video. As an actor!



38. **Ravi Coltrane** *Spirit Fiction* (jazz royalty, wearing the crown well)

Many talented musicians have been the offspring of major acts. It's never easy to get out of their shadows and establish your own identity. Ravi Coltrane had two talented parents but he's made his own way long ago. Here's more proof.



**39. John Mayer -- *Born And Raised* (skip the interviews, play the music)**

I remember how gracious John Mayer was when he won one of his first Grammys, saying it had come very quickly and he was going to work hard to earn it in the years to come. Well done, I thought. He hasn't been terribly gracious since but his music has steadily improved. This may be his best album yet, striking a Laurel Canyon pose that suits him very well. If you've been away for a while or never really been a fan, this is the time to give another listen. This should probably be higher but I'm still getting over the shock of liking it so much.

**40. Punch Brothers -- *Who's Feeling Young Now?*/*Ahoy* (bluegrass expanded)**

**Jason Aldean** *Night Train* (country demanded)

**Dwight Yoakam** -- *3 Pears* (rebel remanded)

Some people think they don't like country music. Really? Not Hank Williams or Johnny Cash or Patsy Cline or Willie Nelson? Oh, well, okay they like some of them of course. If you don't want to wait 40 years to appreciate some country music, try out the Punch Brothers, who have expanded the definition of bluegrass; Jason Aldean who is a traditionalist to many but only because Dwight Yoakam paved the way. All three have strong new albums. Aldean's getting better and Yoakam has his best in a few years. The Punch Brothers haven't even really peaked yet. Just to prove it, they've followed their latest album with an even better EP.

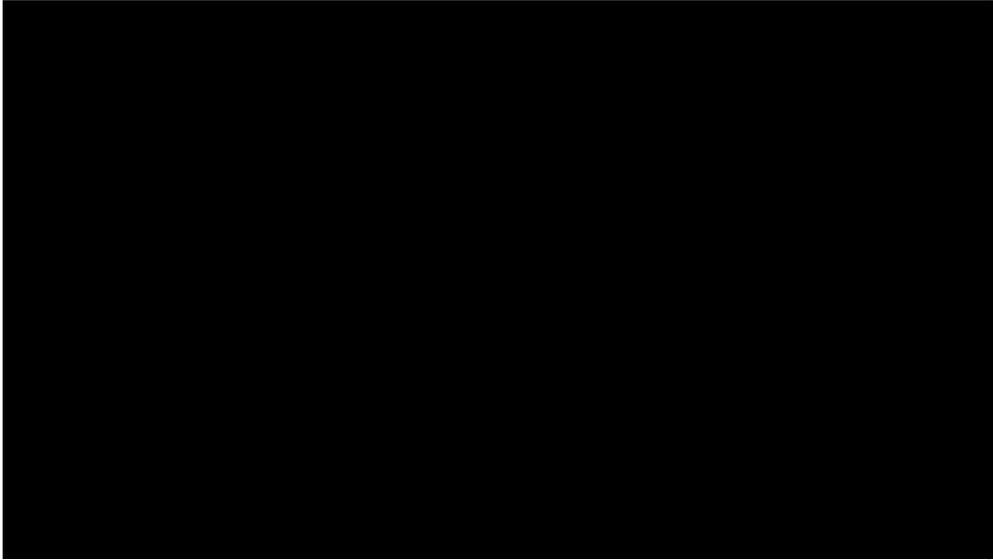
41. **Brian Eno** -- *Lux* (genius in solo instrumental mode)

Brian Eno is one of the most important artists in music history. A founding member of Roxy Music, he's also been a key player in some of the best music by David Bowie, U2, Talking Heads and too many more to mention. Heck, he's even virtually invented entire genres like ambient and New Age. His latest instrumental album is as intriguing and beautifully shaped as always. How it will rank alongside masterpieces like *Another Green World* or *Music For Airports* is yet to be seen. But it's the latest addition to a discography that few will ever approach, much less match. I rarely say this but I'll say it here: a genius. Here's a wonderful collaborative video he made with visual input from fans.



42. **Bruno Mars** -- *Unorthodox Jukebox* (Michael Jackson's heir apparent)

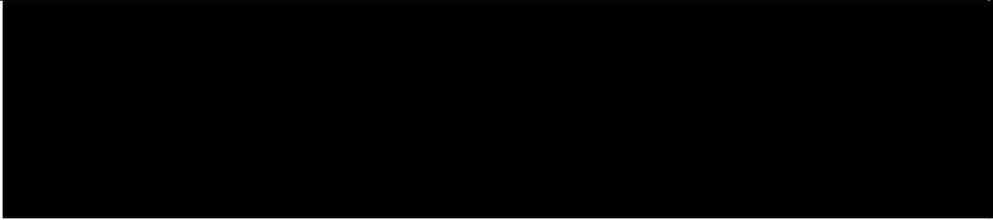
I'm a bit disappointed with this album, to be honest. The music highs on it are so strong, it deserves to be on here. ("When I Was Your Man" is classic.) But here and there on the album, Mars is...crude. Mind you, I'm not remotely offended. (Green Day and Miguel have songs that are rather hilariously crude on this list.) But it just doesn't suit Mars. He's the heir apparent to Michael Jackson as far as I'm concerned, a complete entertainer who can create world-beating popular music. He needs to make a Thriller-like vow to create an album on which there's no quirkiness, no rawness. An album where every single track sounds like #1 hit a la "Locked Out Of Heaven." (Another gem.) He can do it. Just listen.



43. **Suzanne Vega** -- *Close Up Vol. 4: Songs Of Family* (revealing catalog)

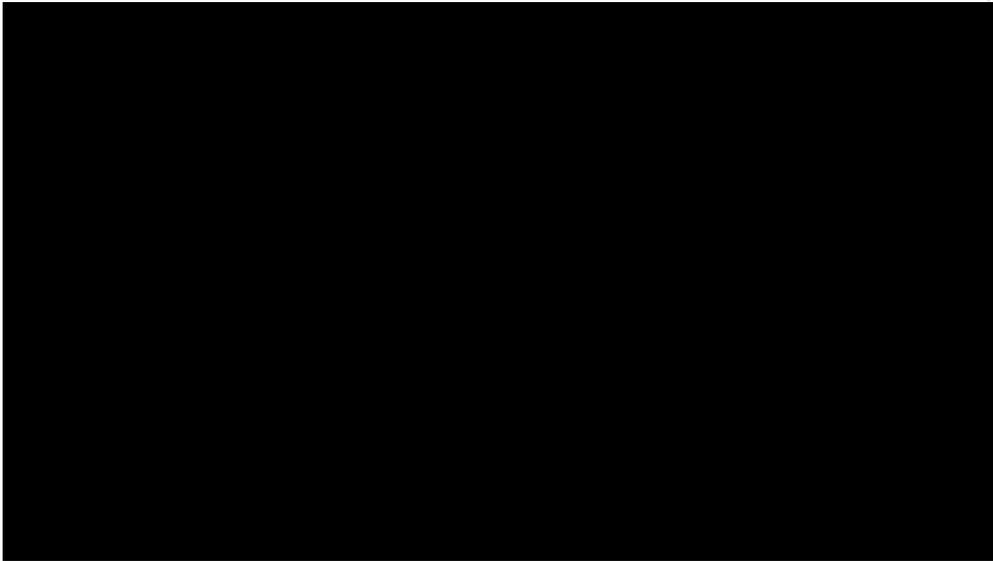
It's pretty remarkable what Suzanne Vega has done here. She took a necessity (reclaiming some of her songs by re-recording them) and turned it into a four volume project that showed the remarkable catalog of tunes she's written over the years AND delivered versions that shine new light on them. A singular, under-appreciated talent.





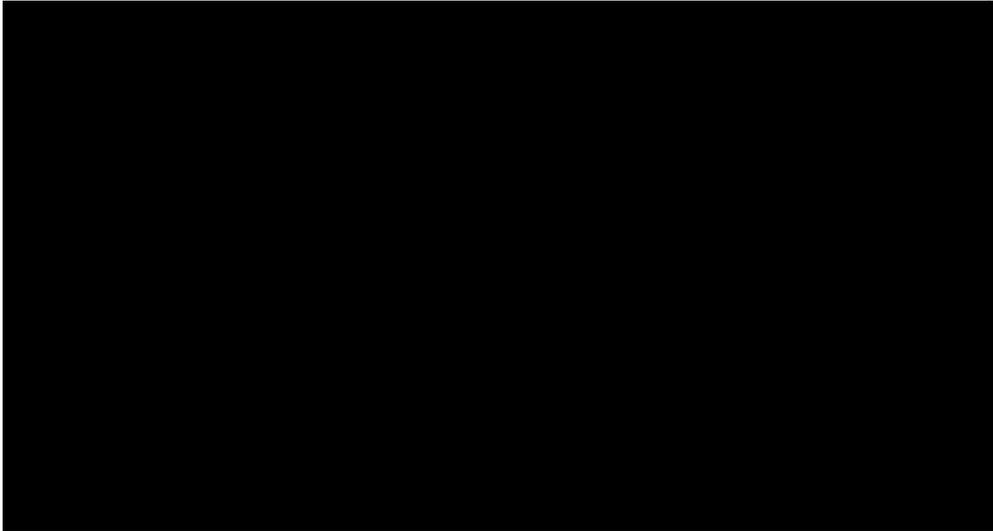
44. **Jake Bugg** -- **Jake Bugg** (promising UK folkie)

Sure he's cute but don't hold that against him. Jake Bugg is a real folkie with a flare for muscular melodies when called for. Bugg has enjoyed great success in the UK but he's young enough to hear his music name-checked with Dylan and foolishly say Dylan's not much of an influence. (Dude, if you're holding a guitar, Dylan is an influence. Trust me. And if someone says you're influenced by Dylan, say "thank you.") It's come a little fast, so we won't know until the second album how this is going to pan out. But he's got "promising" written all over him and "Two Fingers" has a Supergrass sort of catchiness that's hard to shake.



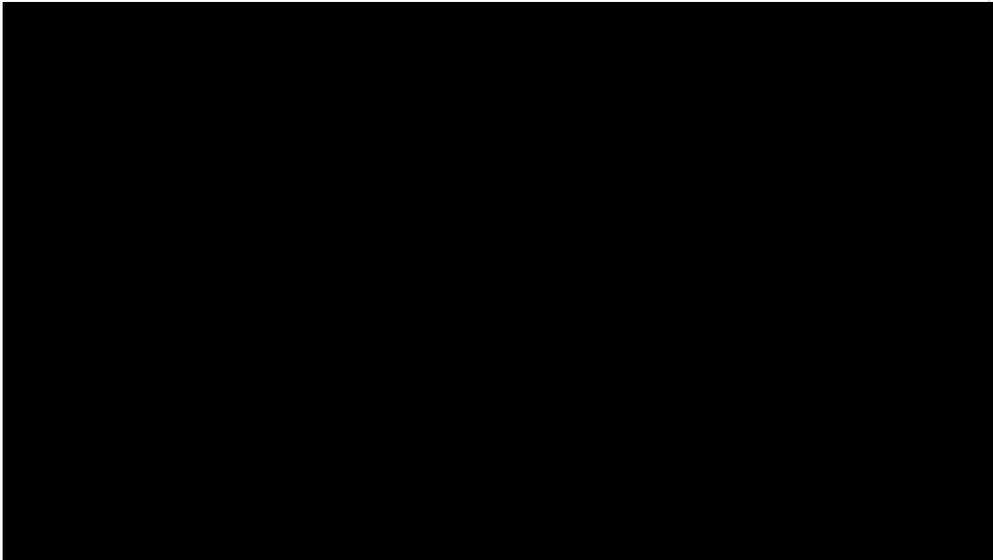
45. **Band Of Horses** -- *Mirage Rock* (career best for rockers)

I've never quite had a handle on Band Of Horses. But happily they've managed to plug along anyway and improved mightily, peaking with 2010's *Infinite Arms* and now their latest. In it for the long haul, clearly.



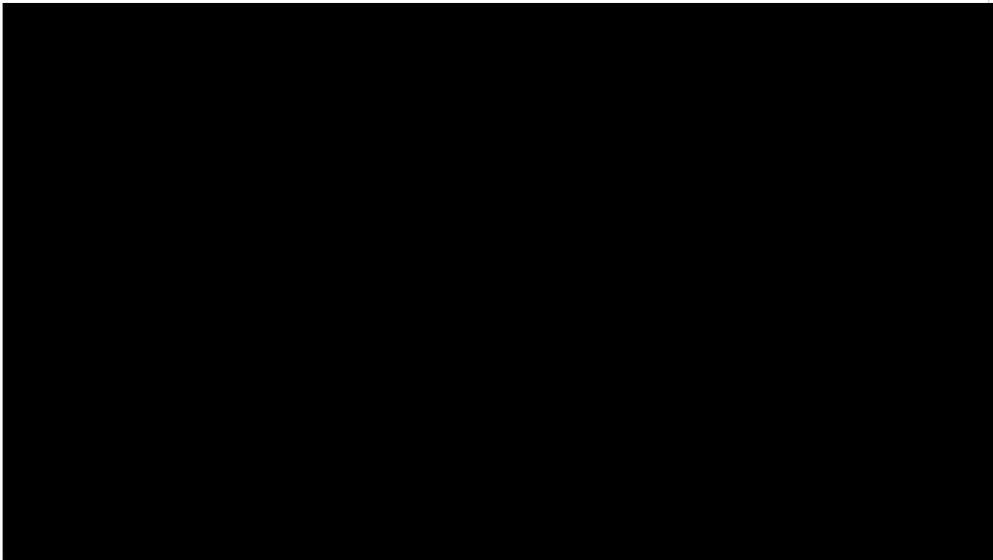
**46. The Magnetic Fields** -- *Love At The Bottom Of The Sea* (miserablist pop)

Here's hoping Stephen Merritt never finds true love, or at least never for very long. His hand-crafted pop songs of misery and regret and occasional success are a never-ending source of delight. It's been a while since *69 Love Songs* captured the attention of the world. But he's been consistently good long before and long after that cheeky stunt.



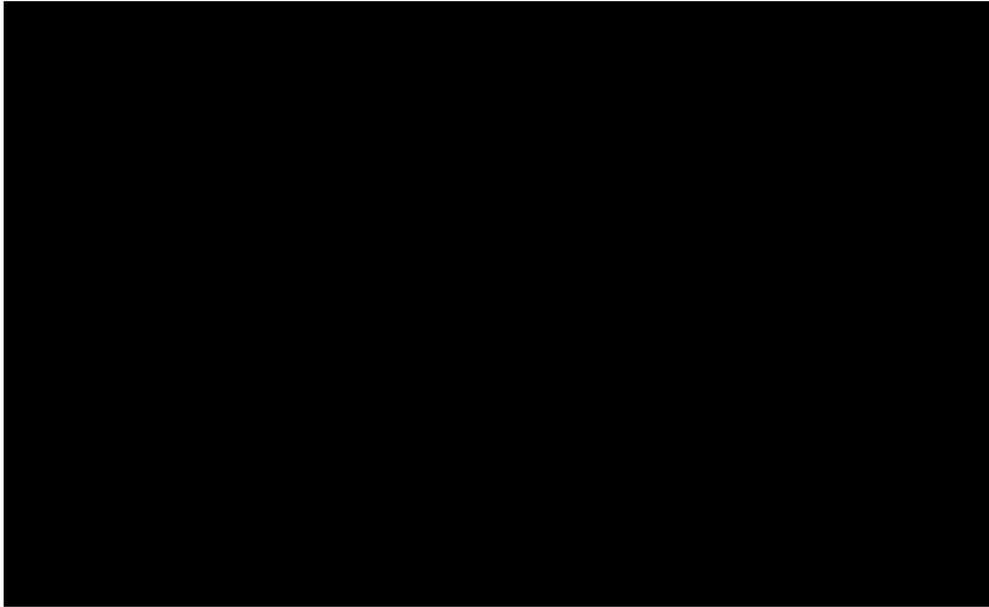
**47. Bryan Ferry** -- *The Jazz Age* (left turn instrumentals)

It was inevitable, I suppose. Rock stars have long turned to "symphonic" backing to put a new, mature spin on their catalog. Others have gone acoustic or country or choral or done anything to shine a new light on the classics fading further and further into the past. Surely it was only a matter of time before someone said, "My music needs to be played in the style of a 1920s swinging jazz orchestra." Okay, maybe it wasn't that inevitable. But it makes perfect sense for Bryan Ferry, whose work has always echoed cabaret and earlier eras. Nonetheless, it makes sense but it's also bonkers. Ridiculous. Silly. And yet somehow quite wonderful. I'm a little surprised there aren't vocals on every track, perhaps a songbird to chirp in on the second or third verse à la those old 78s. But this odd conceit is actually charming and quite convincing. Put it on your coffee house and customers will probably wonder what 1930s band is playing.



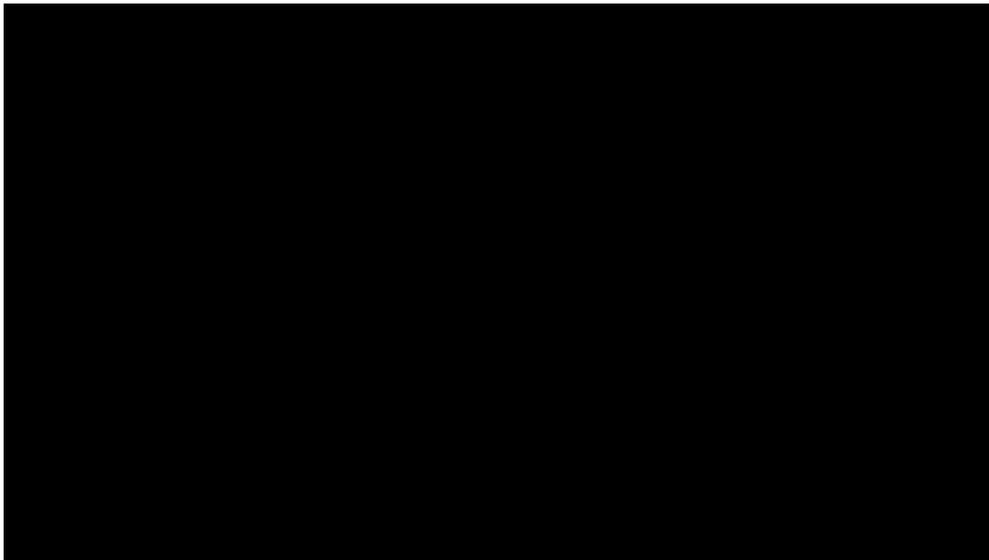
48. **David Byrne And St. Vincent** -- *Love This Giant* (a rock giant shows signs of life)

When Brian Eno isn't around, David Byrne finds inspiration in other places. This time, it's St. Vincent, who proves an excellent foil for him. Together they've created a genuine album of collaboration, with some great horns and a distinctive back and forth that makes one hope they do this again soon.



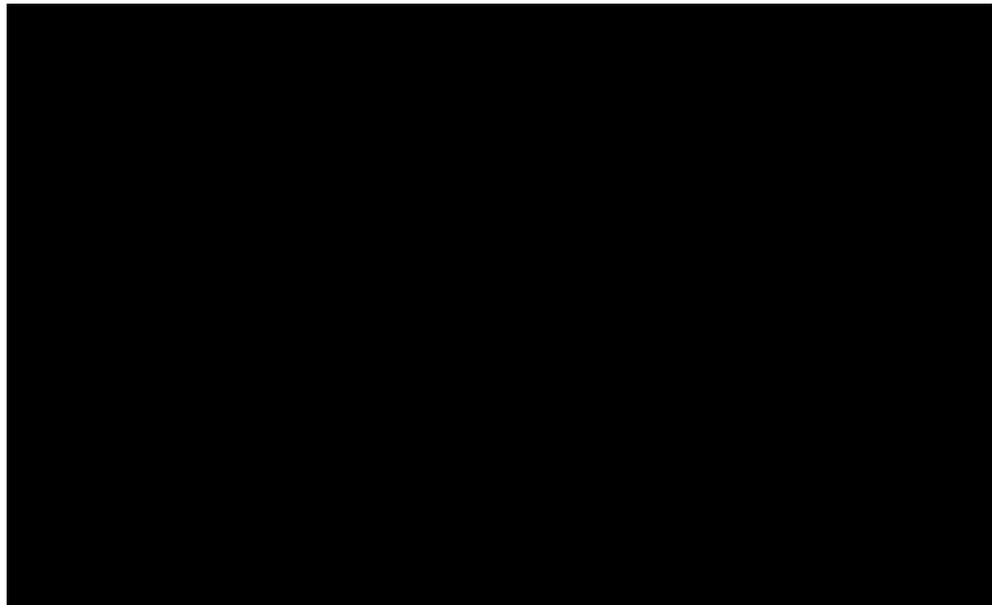
49. **Damon Albarn** -- *Dr. Dee* (pastoral concept album about English eccentric)

Damon Albarn has proven so good in so many contexts, he deserves to be followed without question no matter where he goes. That might mean a cartoon rock band or world music from Africa or a concept album about 16th century figure John Dee, a somewhat obscure historical figure to most who was a major figure in his time, a genuine scholar and also a spiritualist who tried to commune with angels. Albarn has crafted a lovely work with choral flourishes, instrumentals and songs with melodies of Blur-like beauty. I could call it an opera; should call it an opera since that's what it is. But his pop fans are scared enough already and if they listen without realizing it's an opera, they might actually like it.



50. **Kris Kristofferson** -- *Feeling Mortal* (one foot in the grave country)

Kris Kristofferson has always been more important as a songwriter than a recording artist. But that shouldn't overshadow the fact that he's recorded some great work, from key early works that expanded the notion of country to his collaborations with Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings in The Highwaymen. He always seemed like the lucky fellow in that group but they appreciated more than I the depth of his songs. Still, he's 76 now and delivering one of the best albums of his career. I call this category the one-foot-in-the-grave genre. Not because the artist has suddenly become better but because the mortality they're staring down makes us focus and pay attention before it's too late. That might seem cynical but we're the lucky ones if we do. It's probably not Kristofferson that's feeling mortal, it's us.

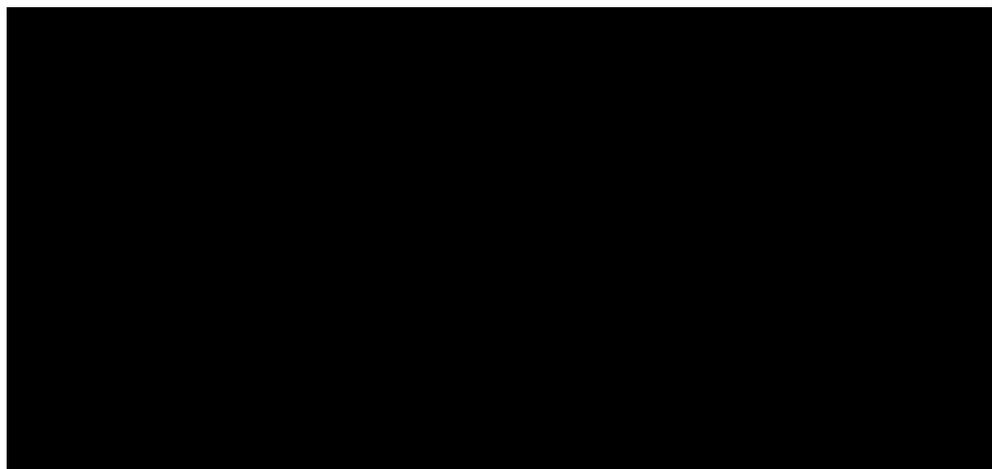


#### **BEST REISSUES**

**Bill Withers** -- *Bill + Withers: The Complete Sussex And Columbia Albums*

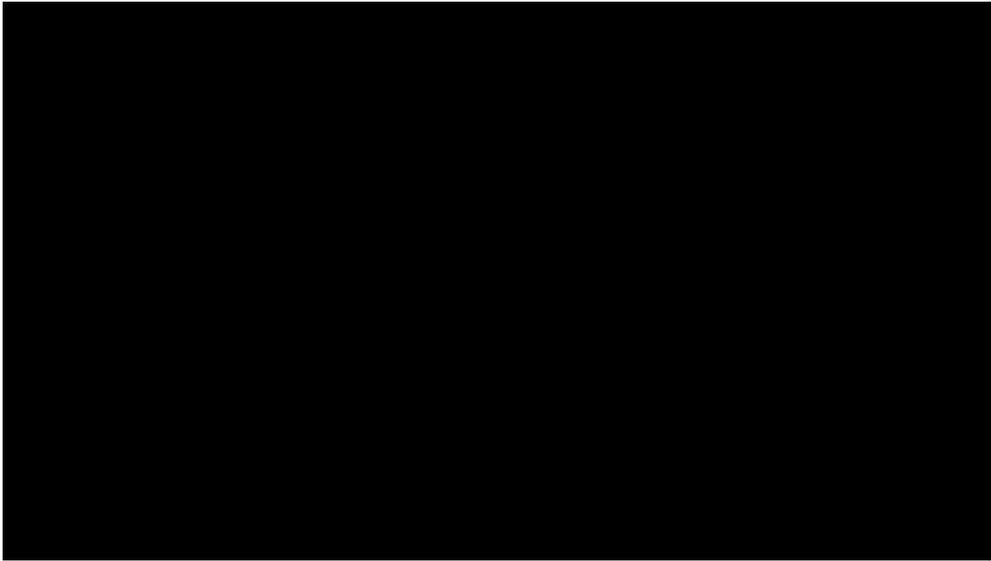
**Louis Armstrong** -- *The Okeh, Columbia And RCA Victor Recordings 1925-1933*

As album sales fade, record labels have started to deliver no-frills boxed sets. I think it's great. Bill Withers is one of the major talents of the 1970s and 1980s; he's been rediscovered and appreciated anew a number of times now over the past decade. Too often, he's seen as peaking with those first two classic albums. But the deeper I get into his catalog, the more I see how strong he was throughout. You simply have to own *Just As I am* and *Still Bill*. But you'll be smart if you keep going and listen to *Justments*, *Making Music*, *Naked And Warm*.... This nine CD set (all eight studio albums plus his live record) is a welcome reminder of how his talent goes way beyond "Ain't No Sunshine" and "Lean On Me." Sure, you know "Grandma's Hands." But what about "Railroad Man" with Jose Feliciano from *Justments*?





Louis Armstrong has been packaged and repackaged many times over. But you can't ever tire of the Hot Fives and Hot Sevens, the key early work that defined jazz. Armstrong's boxed set contains all of that music and a wealth of others. Every home used to have an encyclopedia. Every home should have this music. It's essential. And it's never been more affordable. "Potato Head Blues" is only Woody Allen's short list of the reasons he's happy to be alive. Listen and you'll know why.



### **EARLY FAVORITES FOR 2013**

**The Mavericks** -- *In Time*

**Richard Thompson** -- *Electric*

**Wayne Shorter** -- *Without A Net*

**Ron Sexsmith** -- *Forever Endeavour*

**William Tyler** -- *Impossible Truth*

**Aaron Neville** -- *My True Story*

**Eels** -- *Wonderful Glorious*

**Miles Davis Quintet -- Live In Europe 1969: The Bootleg Series Volume Two**

*Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the co-host of **Showbiz Sandbox**, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's **available** for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his **website** and his **daily blog**. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also **available** for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and **gain** access to thousands of ratings and reviews.*

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