

Grammy Preview: The Actual Best Albums of 2014

Grammy Preview: The Actual Best Albums of 2014

Who needs the Grammys when you've got me? Ignore that popularity contest and check out some of my favorite albums of 2014.

Perhaps every list of the best albums of the year should be labeled "The Best Albums of the Year...That I've Listened To." This year, I've listened to more albums in a long time, thanks to extra driving on the highway, my favorite way to hear new music. And still I've got a list as long as my arm of albums to check out, not to mention albums I'd like to hear several more times and really live with before making a judgement. So this is a snapshot of how I feel about this batch of music right now. We can argue till the cows come home about what should be #1 and why I'm missing artist So-And-So and how could I include that piece of junk? It's fun!

Here's why I make my list every year: hopefully you'll check it out, see some music in a genre you love and give it a listen, find out an artist you already like released a new CD you didn't know about and maybe just maybe take a flier on someone you've never heard of making music in a style you rarely listen. You can literally [go to YouTube](#), type in the name of any of these artists and start listening to their music right away before plunking down money for an album. So you've got no excuses; at least check a few songs out and see what you hear. Maybe it'll be what I hear: some great music.

If you're interested, here is my [Master List of the Best Albums Of All Time](#). I list a favorite for every year and then my best-of list from the early 1920s to the present. Believe me, it changes all the time! Below is the list you can scan quickly followed by a brief chat about each artist and why I love them, as well as a video of one of their songs if you're inclined to check it out. Enjoy! And let me know, what's your favorite album of 2014?

THE BEST ALBUMS OF THE YEAR -- 2014

KAISER CHIEFS -- Education, Education, Education and War
 STURGILL SIMPSON -- Metamodern Sounds In Country Music
 SHARON JONES AND THE DAP KINGS -- Give The People What They Want
 BONES -- Skinny and Rotten and Seabed et al
 BECK -- Morning Phase
 THE FEELING -- Boy Cried Wolf
 AMY LAVERE -- Runaway's Diary
 BETTY BUCKLEY -- Ghostlight
 BRIAN ENO AND KARL HYDE -- Someday World
 BETA RADIO -- Colony Of Bees
 BEN L'ONCLE SOUL -- A Coup de Reves
 JIMMER PODRASKY -- The Would-Be Plans
 CHUCK PROPHET -- Night Surfer
 ARIANA GRANDE -- My Everything
 TINARIWEN -- Emmar
 THE VINES -- Wicked Nature
 BENJAMIN BOOKER -- Benjamin Booker
 DAMON ALBARN -- Everyday Robots

MARY J BLIGE -- The London Sessions

J COLE -- 2014 Forest Hills Drive

HURRAY FOR THE RIFF RAFF -- Small Town Heroes

ROSANNE CASH -- The River And The Thread

HAMILTON LEITHAUSER -- Black Hours

DYLAN GARDNER -- Adventures In Real Time (tie) and

PETE MOLINARI -- Theosophy '14 (tie)

COMMON -- Nobody's Smiling

KELLY WILLIS AND BRUCE ROBISON -- Our Year

LEONARD COHEN -- Popular Problems

GREG ASHLEY -- Another Generation of Slaves

STANTON MOORE -- Conversations

THE GHOST OF A SABER TOOTH TIGER -- Midnight Sun

SKATERS -- Manhattan

TOM PETTY -- Hypnotic Eye

BEN HOWARD -- I Forget Where We Were

RUMER -- Into Colour

ROBBIE WILLIAMS -- Under The Radar, Vol. 1

JOHN HIATT -- Terms Of My Surrender

THE VERONICAS -- The Veronicas

OLD CROW MEDICINE SHOW -- Remedy

tUnE yArDs -- Nikki Nack

TIM MCGRAW -- Sundown Heaven Town

NEIL DIAMOND -- Melody Road (tie)

BARRY MANILOW -- Night Songs (tie)

THE LIVING SISTERS -- Harmony Is Real: Songs For A Happy Holiday

THE BEST ALBUMS OF THE YEAR IN DEPTH -- 2014

1-10

Kaiser Chiefs/Education, Education, Education...War (rousing rock) -- When it comes down to it, picking the best album of the year is pretty easy. Which one do I keep returning to again and again? Which gives me the most pleasure, the biggest jolt of excitement when I put it on? That would be this barn burner from the Kaiser Chiefs. They debuted the same year as another UK band Arctic Monkeys and those two groups are forever linked in my mind. One turns out a great album and the other one responds with one still better. It's a friendly creative rivalry and all in my head so don't think Oasis versus Blur. Last year Arctic Monkeys wowed everyone with AM. Now Kaiser Chiefs have this. I think it's even better though most haven't paid it the attention it deserves. Education, Education, Education...War has the righteous political fire of The Clash and ten committed, rousing numbers just perfect for this post-economic meltdown, New Normal malaise we live in. Great stuff.

Sturgill Simpson/Metamodern Sounds In Country Music (post-modern retro-country) -- It's been a less than stellar year for mainstream country music, with even old reliable Brad Paisley turning in an album that was merely good instead of very good or great. Too many acts seemed too interchangeable and radio-ready from Jason Aldean on down. Not Sturgill Simpson, the latest new act to seem revolutionary by heading back to the roots. Of course anyone with an opening track called "Turtles All The Way Down" is clearly ready to throw a few curveballs. But this is the real deal and all we need to see is if Simpson has the songwriting chops to go the distance and deliver more songs like these.

Sharon Jones/Give The People What They Want (classic soul) -- She's got the backstory of the year, with this new album delayed after Jones was diagnosed with cancer. She fought off that beast and is now stronger than ever. Happily, it this good news is paired with an album as good as she's ever done. A sensational live act, Jones also has the excellent Dap Kings delivering in the studio. Always of the moment but classic in sensibility, here Jones has married some uptown sophistication via strings and the such with her usual juke joint heart. Stellar. It would be brilliant if Jones won for Best R&B album and there's actually a good chance she might. Fingers crossed. (The fact that she's not even one of the performers when Jones would WIPE THE STAGE with everyone else in that auditorium is the real shame however.)

Bones/Skinny and Seabed et al (free rap for everyone!) -- Who is this guy? I felt like Butch and Sundance this year: every time I turned around, some rapper named Bones had delivered yet another album or EP or single and then another album and then ANOTHER single. Music was pouring out of this guy and I'd never heard of him and couldn't buy his music on Amazon or iTunes if I wanted to. Huh? Turns out he's a heartland rapper now moved to LA who is putting out his music for free and spurning all record label offers (for the moment). His videos have [garnered a following on YouTube](#) for their creepy VHS aesthetic. But I started with the music. The album Skinny has proven the most enduring for me; anyone who can rap and include a sample from the so-bad-it's-good Kevin Kline movie Life As A House is alright by me. I'm completely over braggadocio in rap and hip-hop. You can document a hard life but if you are boasting about what a hard-ass MF you are, I'm getting very bored very quickly. (Common documents; Drake is now boasting.) I really like Bones and his sensibility but what I'm nuts about is his producers dubbed TeamSesh. Like Beck's Mellow Gold done by the Dust Brothers, the soundscape is so inventive and cool I'm sure they could make even me sound like an interesting rapper. Pair them with someone of genuine talent like Bones and the result is hypnotic.

Beck/Morning Phase (mellow magic) -- speaking of Beck, this follow-up in sensibility to Sea Change is also his best album since Sea Change and the two of them mark a mellow peak in this artist's career. (A career I never would have predicted to have legs based on what I assumed was the one-hit wonder "Loser." I was wrong!) It's lovely, haunting and gently optimistic all wrapped up in one. It probably won't happen but I'd love Beck to get a career award of sorts by winning Album Of The Year for this. (Sea Changes wasn't even nominated for the top prize in 2003, the year Norah Jones swept everything in sight.)

The Feeling/Boy Cried Wolf (anthemic pop-rock) -- I was excited by this UK band's debut, which came out in the US in 2007. It had a 70s rock vibe, the handsome lead singer defined his sexuality by saying he didn't want to be put in a box, the hooks were plentiful -- what's not to like? 12 Stops And Home was a terrific opening shot. And then, as sometimes happens with British acts that never make much of an impression on the US market, I lost track of them. Two albums and a greatest hits set later, they're back with Boy Cried Wolf, which is just as melodic and a joy to listen to as their debut. Are the other two albums I missed just as good? I haven't the foggiest until I track them down. But anyone with a fondness for rock solid songwriting and pop hooks and the rock radio pleasure they got from the Guardians Of The Galaxy soundtrack should check this out pronto.

Amy LaVere/Runaway's Diary (singer-songwriter heaven) /**Betty Buckley**/Ghostlight(producer-singer heaven) - I lost track of The Feeling but I missed out on Amy LaVere entirely. This singer-songwriter in the folk-rock vein grabbed my attention from the first note of this vivid album. It was so mature, so fully formed I immediately wondered how long she'd been around. Apparently, I'm three albums and an EP late to the party. And not a moment too soon. For fans of, oh, Lucinda Williams or Teddy Thompson, perhaps? Terrific songwriting, great vocals. Can't wait to see her live which I suspect will make me a fan for life.

Betty Buckley of course is a theatrical legend and a savvy interpreter of other people's songs. With T Bone Burnett as producer creating a smoky, late-night Texan ambiance, Buckley offers up what might be the best album of her career. It's as if Emmylou Harris decided to do a standards album, though of course Buckley is always her own woman and -- like Linda Ronstadt -- her tastes range wide. With Buckley, you reference a

spectrum of singers, not just the obvious cabaret and theater touchstones most Tony winners would genuflect to. Her subtly astringent vocals pierce right to the heart of these songs, which are impeccably arranged. Whether it's "Lazy Sunday" from the musical *The Golden Apple* or Jefferson Airplane's "Comin' Back To Me" or the Tom Waits/Kathleen Brennan gem "Take It With Me When I Go," Buckley's interpretations are marvelous, the setting refined and the CD wears its eclecticism easily. This is an "album" in the classic sense of the word and one to be savored.

Brian Eno and Karl Hyde/Someday World (a singular duo) -- Brian Eno looms over popular music like few talents. He's a founding member of Roxy Music, a key producer behind the best work of bands like Talking Heads, David Bowie and U2 (to name just a few) and a solo artist responsible for literally creating entire genres of music! His DNA is everywhere. This new album with Karl Hyde of Underworld is one of his best vocal albums (Eno often delivers soundscapes a la ambient and New Age, two genres that can claim him as their patriarch). Like so much of Eno's work, it is surprisingly accessible even though his reputation and envelope-pushing nature might suggest otherwise. Mournful, melodic (that's a strange compliment to have to pay an album but so much of popular music ISN'T melodic), strange and captivating on some molecular level you can't quite pin down.

Beta Radio/Colony Of Bees (shimmering Americana) -- Yep, more music in the Mumford/Lumineers vein. Or heck, if you don't want to be churlish, more music in the Laurel Canyon vein or more music in the country-ish rock vibe or more music made on the front porch the way so much great music springs forth in America. Apparently, Beta Radio have come to modest attention in two typically modern ways. First, their handmade album *Seven Sisters* got play on Pandora and Spotify via those acts named above. People listening to a channel a la Mumford heard this, listened to more and then more and decided they liked it. Then Beta Radio had two songs placed on the CW drama *Hart Of Dixie* (which is filmed in their hometown of Wilmington, North Carolina). Don't laugh -- getting played on a TV show is the equivalent of having your video selected by MTV back in the day or by an actual honest to goodness influential deejay even more back in the day. Now comes their second full album. *Colony Of Bees* is sonically lovely, with the choral vocals that seem to define the whole Fleet Foxes world for me alterna acts live in these days. The lyrics are continually catching you up short with their simple elegance. It's by no means a concept album or song cycle but play it and when it's over, you'll feel like you've been somewhere emotionally. And you have.

Ben L'Oncle Soul/A Coup De Reves (French Soul? Why not?) -- It's a little head-spinning. A French guy singing new songs in the classic Stax/Otis Redding mold? You bet. He used to be called Uncle Ben but found out that had different connotations in the US so now it's French for Ben The Soul Uncle or however you translate it. Never mind. The music is universal and very, very good. Like Sharon Jones, this is not some retro imitation of a sound from long ago. It's new music delivered in a classic style. Dive in!

11-20

Jimmer Podrasky/The Would-Be Plans (Americana emeritus)

Chuck Prophet/ Night Surfer (durable veteran) -- Podrasky has the comeback album of the year. Jimmer Podrasky of *The Rave-Ups* -- a key early proponent of Americana -- returns after an eventful life and a long hiatus with a tuneful terrific album fans and newcomers alike should embrace. [Read more here](#). Prophet never went anywhere. He's one of those dependable artists smart people become fanatic about. John Prine, Jesse Winchester, Chuck Prophet -- certain artists turn out one solid album after another but somehow they're always preaching to the faithful and even the occasional spate of media attention (never that great) doesn't change things. Fans buttonhole friends and shake their heads, "You've got pretty good taste. Why the hell aren't you listening to Artist A/B/C and so on." Well, you don't know really and sometimes you listen to them and you get it and other times you listen to someone's "cult" favorite and it doesn't quite click. After being slapped around about Prophet for quite a while, it finally clicked for me here. Now the door has opened and I can go back and

discover 2012's Temple Beautiful and about a half dozen other terrific albums. This one is wry and funny and catchy and rocks out. "Wish me luck/ Even if you don't mean it!" Lou Reed worthy. Probably only his fans will listen but now I'm one of them too.

Ariana Grande/My Everything (state of the art pop-soul) -- Unlike so much r&b pop songs, this doesn't feel like a robotic collection of singles, but an album by a living, breathing artist. And it's catchy as hell.

Tinariwen/Emmar (desert blues) -- There's nothing wrong with a little musical tourism. Sometimes acts or sounds from another part of the world catch your ear for an album or a moment in time. Then you move on. The fact that you didn't dive into that music, become immersed in it and an expert on the various artists who perform it doesn't mean keeping your ears open to new sounds is somehow just trendy. Heck, a lot of pop music is trendy, whether from Georgia (Atlanta) or Georgia (in Russia -- actually, is there any good music from Georgia?). Anyway, when Tinariwen popped up, I admitted to loving their music but wasn't sure if I'd keep returning to it or want to hear new stuff from them. But this electric blues desert band from the Saharan Desert region of northern Mali (hey, they're nomads, after all) has proven themselves not a flavor of the month but a world class act. Their pulsing electric guitar sound was vivid and exciting and indeed for album after album they were undeniable. Now they've placed the emphasis on acoustic music of sorts, recording the album in the wide open spaces that formed their world. Bizarrely, this is also the album where they collaborate with people from TV On the Radio, Neils Cline from Wilco and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band. The result is electric, even if it is acoustic. I now fantasize about actually heading to the desert and hearing them perform under a starry sky. Hey, a fellow can dream, can't he?

The Vines/Wicked Nature (ferociously tuneful) -- Ah drugs. You are the bane of rock stars' existence. The marvelous band The Vines popped up with a Beatles-esque (I use the term sparingly), crazily infectious debut. Massive UK attention followed along with a lesser second album and the various addictive afflictions of celebrity. They've pulled themselves together and come roaring back with this marvelous effort that reclaims their talent, their belief in themselves and my belief in them. Like Supergrass, they seem capable of tackling any genre and making it their own. More!

Benjamin Booker/Benjamin Booker (stinging blues guitar) -- So many blues guitarists come struttin' along, claiming they're the next Robert Cray or the next Stevie Ray Vaughan or loudly insisting they shouldn't be compared to them because this guy is so damn original. And I rarely care. Too often, these young guns sound like show-offs, diving into extended solos before I even know the song or heard more than a boast or two about how the ladies love 'em. It's the electric blues version of those tiresome rappers claiming to be "hard." Then someone like Benjamin Booker comes in and just starts playing and the songs are so good and the solos so concise and fun that you think, this is the real deal. And he doesn't have to do a thing except keep playing. His guitar speaks for itself.

Damon Albarn/Everyday Robots (alternative rock, finally) -- Few artists have proven as peripatetic as Damon Albarn. Even fewer have been successful every step of the way. Blur, Gorillaz, The Good The Bad & The Queen -- all hugely successful bands. Two operas, world music, film scores and now the nuttiest twist of his career: a solo album. Of course, it's not that conventional. And there's Brian Eno putting in a guest appearance (see his album in the Top 10). Like most everything Albarn has done, this is literate, quirky, sneakily emotional and quite good.

Mary J Blige/The London Sessions (Soul with an accent) -- Dusty went to Memphis. Mary goes to...London? Well, this is a stupid idea. Mary J. Blige has been in a bit of a rut and of course soul music has been fertile ground for artists in the UK, especially recently from Amy Winehouse to Adele on down. But still, send Blige to London to collaborate with some of the top acts/writers/producers around? Isn't that like asking Hunter Hayes to deliver up the goods for Elvis? What Blige really needs is some miserable events in her personal life so she can drawn on that pain and.... Well, what do I know because this turns out to be one of the best albums of her

career. It's also one of the most vibrantly positive, without being tiresome. All the UK artists are on their toes here and they've clearly crafted music written expressly to shine a light on where Blige is at today. She wasn't in the rut that Tina Turner faced before *Private Dancer*, but this does have the valedictory ring of that album. As a bonus, Blige is on her best behavior. She's got very good songs so she doesn't feel the need to over-sing them. Dusty would be proud.

J. Cole/2014 Forest Hills Drive (rap without the bluster) -- Don't twist my words. When I say I'm tired of dull boasts from rappers about how hard they are, that doesn't mean I insist on "humble" or "modest" rappers. Drake has become boring because all he has left to talk about is his success. That's the classic problem of music stars who hit it big and then find out there's nothing left to write about but the cage they're in and the groupies and how rich and lonely they are. And heck, you can boast if you do it entertainingly. J Cole does that on this vivid, smart album that is rich in insight and humor gritty real life but low on thug life celebration. But is that really his old address in Queens? Whoever lives there now is gonna get awfully tired soon of all his fans swinging by for a peek.

Hurray For The Riff Raff/Small Town Heroes (folk/country/punk/rock/blues/soul) (tie)

Rosanne Cash -- *The River and the Thread* (Southern heart) (tie)-- Genre classification becomes a little silly when an artist like Alynda Lee Segarra aka Hurray For The Riff Raff is at play. It starts out with casual fun in the folkie, country-rock, let's make some music vibe of "Blue Ridge Mountain." And the scope and ambition becomes clearer with every passing track until the haunting, fiddle-drenched closer "Forever Is Just A Day" knocks you out. Once again, I'm late to the party on this one and eager to listen to it more and more. This is inspiring stuff, knocking down walls with glee in every possible way. Just as inspiring is to see a veteran like Cash dig deep and deliver another strong album to add to her impressive catalog. The covers album inspired by her dad has really loosened up her vocals and given Cash a newfound confidence in her singing. Her songwriting of course was always great.

Hamilton Leithauser/Black Hours (ring-a-ding-rock) -- Now that The Walkmen have taken an "extreme hiatus," lead singer Hamilton Leithauser has indulged his sonic love of baroque pop. It's a cross between Sinatra and early rock and roll and I just love it. Play it loud cruising down the highway at 1 in the morning and there's no better album in the world. Bonus points if your heart was just broken. Can he do it again? I sure hope he'll try.

21-30

Dylan Gardner/Adventures In Real Time (rising talent #1) (tie)

Pete Molinari/Theosophy '14 (rising talent #2) (tie) -- Dylan had me at the first line of the first song: "I'll be John and you'll be Yoko." My kind of star-crossed lovers. The fun was just getting started as this rollicking record in the vein of Ben Kweller proved delightfully consistent. He's just a kid, apparently working through his influences. I'm in. Pete Molinari is a British lad and anyone who's smart enough to record with the Jordanaires (as he did on an earlier recording) is alright in my book. Molinari has beefed up his sound since 2010's more folkie/retro *A Train Bound For Glory*. Here he's diving into classic rock of the Sixties or so and at this rate he'll hit the grunge sound in six or so years. Both albums boast very strong songwriting and feel like young artists in the early stages of a strong career. I know I'm not dead because I can still be excited hearing new talent that gets me jazzed up to hear what they're going to do next. I'm betting at least one of these looks like a very smart choice five or so years from now.

Common/Nobody's Smiling (rap valediction) -- Common has been delivering intelligent, concise, pointed, defiant and just plain terrific music for years. His peak was of course *Be* and now that may be matched by *Nobody's Smiling*, which features a clutch of excellent guest stars all at the service of Common's vision. He never confuses hard reality with glorified foolishness and he never minces words. The man is strong enough to say he doesn't know everything as well as apologize for not doing right in the past by those who gave him a leg up at the start. The real deal.

Kelly Willis and Bruce Robison/Our Year (country couple of the year) -- Those other couples may get all the attention on award shows. But for several years, country's first couple -- to me -- has been the under-appreciated Kelly Willis and her husband Bruce Robison. They started off with a holiday album together and now two full-on duets albums. First came the excellent *Cheater's Game* in 2013 and now this worthy follow-up. I'm a little worried that their last three albums have been on three different labels. Can't somebody support artists like this until they find a wider audience? Willis took a hiatus to raise her kids and family obligations keep them both near home a lot of the time. But these pointed, sharp albums of adult emotions should widely appeal to fans of *The Civil Wars* or *The Swell Season* or John Hiatt or John Prine or anyone just pining for the days of classic country duos like Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner. Give 'em a spin.

Leonard Cohen/Popular Problems (ageless grace) -- This is the way to cap off a legendary career. Become a touring legend and a bigger draw than ever and keep delivering new music that can stand proudly next to your best. It will take a long time to sort out what album ranks where in the Leonard Cohen body of work. Some will see these merely as standards for others to record. Others will zero in on the lyrics as an extension of his acclaimed poetry. But never forget that first and foremost this is an album of pop music, intended to be listened to in one sitting as a unique recorded experience. He's proven remarkably consistent over the decades so it's no surprise to hear that *Popular Problems* is a mature, witty work. The opener "Slow" is so fun that at first the rest of the album seemed a notch below. But it's a cohesive body of songs and hangs together beautifully. I don't like the cover art, but then you can't have everything, as Leonard Cohen has been assuring us for a long time now.

Greg Ashley/Another Generation Of Slaves (rock-ish Astral Weeks?) -- I have a special category of music called Music Made When No One Was Listening. Whatever the circumstances, it's music you feel like the artist recorded without any expectation of anyone else in the world hearing it, not really. Either they were so invisible or their time had passed or what they were doing seemed so off the beaten track that clearly they were making the music for the love of it and nothing else. All sorts of albums fit this category if you stretch it, from John Hiatt's *Bring The Family* to The Blue Nile's *Walk Across the Rooftops* to Nick Drake's *Pink Moon* and on and on. Surely *Another Generation Of Slaves* belongs on that list. It's a black, dour, lovely grumpy album recorded by Greg Ashley, best known for his work with The Mirrors and Gris Gis, but not by me since I'd never heard of them or him as far as I know. Between band projects, the prolific and apparently miserable Ashley turns out solo work of all varieties. This one was apparently a lo-fi recording with some jazz musicians and assorted others. "You make me feel like shit" is one hilariously blunt lyric in an album that has a ramshackle glory I would love to capture in text but can't. It's music playing in the next room of a dive bar where you're low on cash and high on cheap liquor. Or something like that. If you're adventurous and of a cynical nature, this will be your new favorite album no one else has heard about.

Stanton Moore/Conversations -- Did you notice the embarrassing lack of jazz and classical music on this list so far? I did. Though I listened to a lot of albums, those genres passed me by this year, by and large. It took my friend Sal to turn me onto the versatile and talented drummer Stanton Moore, a mainstay whenever Sal heads to New Orleans and is looking to plan his musical evenings. Moore can play every style imaginable but here he's leading a jazz trio in a bracing set of originals and some choice covers. It swings, his drumming is notably nimble while unquestionably distinctive and fresh and while it feels utterly modern, *Conversations* is also right smack dab in the traditional camp as well. And most of all, just great fun.

The Ghost Of A Saber Tooth Tiger/Midnight Sun (psychedelic rock, apparently) -- Maybe Sean Lennon has found his sweet spot. Or maybe this set with Charlotte Kemp Muhl will fade and he (or they) will tackle something else). Whatever the case, the psychedelic rock vibe combined with working as a unit with an inspiring collaborator has brought out the best in Lennon, who always seemed to be playing at various guises. Here he sounds fully committed and their work is very good. It feels like a proper band, like a proper start, like the beginning of something.

Skaters/Manhattan (rock n roll, remember that?) -- The Strokes are dead, long live the Skaters. They're a vigorous New York rock band with their own punkish identity and would surely hate the comparison. They're nothing like The Strokes, really, but they're from New York (right down to the cool intro of a taped voice from the subway system to songs like "To Be Young In NYC" (I remember that!) and the amusingly titled "I Wanna Dance (But I Don't Know How)". Oh and they're ridiculously catchy numbers and the album flies by, with not a single song over 4 minutes and most barely 3 minutes. Compared to The Strokes? Lazy on my part. Deal with it, guys.

Tom Petty/Hypnotic Eye (Southern rock, damnit!) -- More of the same and damned proud of it. You play it and think, that's a very good album. And you play it again, waiting for the overall impact to pale a little on repeated listens. But it doesn't. And you play it again and the songs hold up. And you play it again and again and it gets better with every listen. Petty has always been a blind spot for me, don't ask me why. To my despair, I've never seen him in concert. His classic run of albums in the late 1970s and early 1980s barely registered on me. I've been playing catchup ever since and he doesn't have the emotional hold on me that other acts reaching for greatness during my youth still do. But I admire the hell out of his work and like it whenever I listen to it and this album feels very strong indeed. Now who can get me cheap tenth row seats to his next show?

Ben Howard/I Forget Where We Were -- You know your nieces and nephews have been raised right when they can turn you onto an act like Ben Howard and he turns out to be someone substantial and not exactly wildly popular...you know, cool! Howard is right in the Americana vein of Mumford & Sons (an act they love and will probably be following most of their lives). He's a little more confessional, a little more singer-songwriter in a way than those more polished acts. Howard's also convincingly vulnerable and his music is just as durable as his lyrics, growing on me with every listen.

31-40

Rumer/Into Colour (Seventies pop, on the gentle side) -- Oh, I like this album. I wished I liked it more. Or to be precise, I wish I liked it more, right away. Rumer's debut was sterling and her covers album follow-up continued the vibe of Seventies pop in the Burt Bacharach vein. I don't know how to describe it, but you just know when someone is taking on an era or sound versus someone who is steeped in that music and this is just the original material that comes naturally to them. That's the case with Rumer on her debut. Here is more of the same, which is a good thing. She's not trying to rap, thank goodness, nor is she trying to be something she's not. I am reflexively fearful that by the next album it will be still more of the same, a case of diminishing returns. We're not there yet. I should add that I saw her in concert and was absolutely convinced she'll be an artist I care about for many years to come. She was terrific and the show improved on that excellent debut in every way. That's always a good sign. I just haven't had the chance to live with this album yet so I'm wary of giving it too high praise. God knows the acoustic opener is a stunner. It segues into a classic Seventies vibe of the same tune in full pop glory. But here's hoping Rumer can be true to herself but stretch at the same time, the way that beginning with just her and a piano took my breath away. One thing I do love about her is Rumer's positive vibe. She writes about that most daunting of topics: contentment, happiness, fulfilling relationships. It's not all sunshine and rainbows. Her emotions are complex and adult. But celebrating joy is such a rare talent that it's a little unexpected and kind of daring in this cynical world.

Robbie Williams/Under The Radar Vol. 1 (cheeky bastard) -- I'm not just referring to his naked bum, which Williams is displaying on the album cover...yet again! What an exhibitionist this former boy band and UK superstar has always been and hopefully always will be. He's got an unabashed gift for pure pop and isn't afraid to use it. Unlike George Michael and so many others, Williams hasn't confused growing up with having to create music that is "adult" and ungainly in melody and quite frankly boring. He manages to acknowledge he's a lot older and a (little) wiser so his capering doesn't seem sad. But by and large this is tuneful fun and thank god for that. Maybe a track or two from greatness but still a winner. PS Robbie Williams has NEVER been under the radar.

John Hiatt/Terms Of My Surrender (you old rascal, you) -- Eventually, everyone sings the blues.

The Veronicas/The Veronicas -- I don't quite trust The Veronicas. Most every song on this album is catchy as hell. But they're also pretty radically different from one another. Glam pop, rock, soul, folkish...who the hell are they? Are all these musical genres just disguises? A flimsy affectation that will fall apart come their next album? I really can't tell but moment to moment, this is pretty awesome. Turns out they're an Australian duo with this being their third album (and even a clothing line). After a seven year break fans are saying "welcome back" and I'm saying "hello!"

Old Crow Medicine Show/Remedy (Americana stalwarts) -- Anytime I think I'm hip and on top of what's going on in music, I get blindsided yet again. Old Crow Medicine Show has been around for more than 15 years? They were a gateway drug for Mumford & Sons, who say they were listening to this band in high school? They've already been inducted into the Grand Ole Opry, for Pete's sake? And I've just gotten around to them? Remedy blindsided me with its strength and I almost don't trust myself about it. I need to live with this longer and dive into their earlier music before I make any grand pronouncements. It's classic country/folk/Americana of the Emmylou Harris/Mumford variety, with more of a foot in the old world than the new. Don't be surprised to see this creeping up my list in the years to come, while earlier albums like Carry Me Back will surely make the list for years past assuming they're as good as this. I blame their name, which I think I always subconsciously dismissed as a faux attempt at authenticity. Now when do they come to town next? And can I sit in on penny whistle?

tUnE yArDs/Nikki Nack (Cuisinart pop) -- If I don't trust The Veronicas because they seem to morph musically from song to song, then I really don't trust tUnE yArDs because they seem to change multiple times within songs. It's a mash-up of sounds and styles and turns on a dime and it's undeniably fun though it might just be the sort of thing that pales in the listening six months from now. But why deny the sugar rush while it's happening?

Tim McGraw/Sundown Heaven Town (country without the cliches) -- For the past year or two, when listening to male country artists, I have to keep checking the info to see who's singing and the name of the song. So many tunes feel like generic spring break anthems with some yokel accent tossed in for authenticity that it became almost silly. Luckily, Sturgill Simpson let his freak flag fly for old school country and Tim McGraw kept it real for new country with this heartfelt, lyrically specific and engaging new album. There's life in them old boots yet.

Neil Diamond/Melody Road (pure pop) (tie)

Barry Manilow/Night Songs (pure standards) (tie) -- Two hugely popular acts enjoying some late career success, one by returning to his roots and the other by embracing the road not taken. First is Neil Diamond, who has resurged creatively to new heights since recording 12 Songs in 2005 with Rick Rubin. Of course, Diamond has always been hugely popular and delivered one crafty pop song after another. Every few years he'd be re-embraced by fans who actually never let him out of the spotlight very long anyway. It's always been cool to say Hey! Neil Diamond has written some damn good songs! But 12 Songs marked a real maturity. Suddenly Diamond wasn't just delivering albums with a few great songs -- he was delivering actual great albums, the best of his long, storied career. Pared down, naked but still hugely infectious, 12 Songs and Home Before Dark will prove enduring highlights. Now Diamond has returned to the more baroque pop production that has been the foundation of his career. Melody Road is vintage Diamond in sound and new Diamond in lyrical precision. The title track is a great songwriter's tune and song after song is engaging. It's not quite the peak of the last two but it's very, very good indeed. Barry Manilow has always been popular with blue-haired ladies, like some latter day Liberace. He's comfortable in his un-coolness, which is actually the best sort of cool there is. Manilow has a clutch of extremely memorable pop songs, the sort that lodge in your brain and will not leave. But after the massive success of the 1970s and early 1980s he's never really grown, never really delivered the great album of originals he perhaps has in him. (He did tackle a musical and other forms.) Never, that is, except for one exception: that exception was his 1984 album 2:00 AM, Paradise Cafe. It's a jazz album, or more accurately a

cabaret album. Manilow didn't tackle the standards; he wrote originals that feel like standards. He's joined on duets by Mel Torme and Sarah Vaughan; Shelly Manne and Gerry Mulligan are in the studio and it's damn good, the high point of his career. Now with *Night Songs*, Manilow finally follows up that album in proper fashion. It's an album of standards and features just Manilow on piano and vocals. His voice isn't as supple as it was 40 years ago (whose is?) but his phrasing and restraint are impeccable, showing the wisdom of a singer who's been doing this for a long time. It's a lovely little gift to himself (hey, I can do this!) and an intriguing glimpse of the road not taken.

The Living Sisters/*Harmony Is Real: Songs For A Happy Holiday* (holiday heaven) -- I'm nutty about Christmas music and own more holiday albums than is rightfully sane. When new albums come out, I listen avidly but you're lucky to hear one good cover on an album and even luckier if you hear an original holiday song worth keeping. It's very very rare to hear an entire album that scores but that's exactly what The Living Sisters have delivered. They've got funny originals spinning off the idea of Christmas in LA, great covers and gorgeous intertwined vocals from Eleni Mandell, Becky Stark, Inara George and Alex Lilly, who all have successful careers on their own when not recording as this side project. Think the Andrews Sisters meets Phil Spector, sort of. Everyday feels like Christmas when you get to hear an album this unexpectedly good.

Some early favorites for 2015

Steve Earle/*Terraplane* -- Like I said, eventually, everyone sings the blues

Kodaline/*Coming Up For Air* (swinging for the fences a la Coldplay)

The Lone Bellow/*Then Came The Morning* -- Brooklyn band proves debut no fluke

Sleater-Kinney/*No Cities To Love* -- back, finally.