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SURFING THE WAVES OF POPULAR CULTURE
BY MICHAEL GILTZ & FRIENDS

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The Best CDs of 2005 -- The Extended Version

BEST ALBUMS OF 2005

1. **Richard Swift** – *The Richard Swift Collection, Volume One* (literate pop) – in this day and age -- when every band is overhyped and "discovering" someone means watching them perform in a recurring role on a primetime series -- stumbling on a new artist unawares is almost impossible. But a tiny, one paragraph review in a British music magazine compelled me to buy this album by the West Coast-based artist. Think Randy Newman (without the cynicism), Harry Nilsson (without the vocal flourishes), Van Dyke Parks (without the artifice) and Tom Waits (without the gravel). A story teller and a romantic, Swift's songs sound like they were written in a dusty hotel room circa 1920 by a young man wearing a natty suit and composing his lyrics on a manual typewriter. [Swift's website](#) is nifty too.

2. **Sufjan Stevens** – *Illinois* (eclectic pop) – when Sufjan Stevens released *Michigan* and said he was going to release one concept album for every state, it sounded like a threat. Now it seems like a giddy promise. Here he uses many styles – Philip Glass, folk, rock, pop, country – to tell many stories about Illinois, whether it's a UFO sighting, Superman or a serial killer. Bursting with ambition, it succeeds.

3. **The Eels** – *Blinking Lights and Other Revelations* (suicidal pop) – never really focused too strongly on the Eels before, but this Magnetic Fields-like opus makes an obsession with death and dying seem wonderfully life-affirming.

4. **Amadou & Mariam** – *Dimanche a Bamako* (world pop) – a famed Mali duo for decades, Amadou & Mariam were new to me. However, I'm a big fan of their producer here, Manu Chao, who brought his giddy world pop sensibility to their music. The fusion is infectious.

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