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The Best CDs of 2009: It's Never Too Late to Hear Great Music

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Sure, you've seen *Rolling Stone's* picks and *Pitchfork* weighed in and even the *Village Voice* Pazz & Jop poll has published its results.

But it's never too late to get a recommendation for great music. So here are my picks for the best albums of 2009. Happily, with artist web sites and MySpace, you don't have to take my word for it. Whenever possible, I've linked the artist's name to a site playing some of their music; if something intrigues you, go check it out. Chances are, if you're a fan of the artist

or the genre, you'll enjoy it.

The Best CDs of 2009

- The Avett Brothers** *I And Love And You* (Americana)/**Regina Spektor** *Far* (quirky pop via Russian kitsch)
- Ella Fitzgerald** *Twelve Nights In Hollywood* (swinging jazz vocalese)
- Maxwell** *BLACKsummers'night* (Seventies soul)
- Willie Nelson** *American Classic* (Stardust II)/**Rosanne Cash** *The List* (the Great American Songbook, country style)
- Madeleine Peyroux** *Bare Bones*/**Melody Gardot** *My One And Only Thrill*/**Kristina Train** *Spilt Milk* (songbirds, via Paris and Memphis)
- Mark Olson & Gary Louris** *Ready For The Flood* (Jayhawks redux)
- Mayer Hawthorne** *A Strange Arrangement* (blue eyed soul)
- Loudon Wainwright** *High, Wide & Handsome: The Charlie Poole Project* (hilarious, heartfelt blues)
- The XX** *The XX* (boy-girl dynamics)/**Girls** *Album* (quietly ambitious rock)

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10. **Duncan Sheik** *Whisper House* (the real twilight soundtrack)
11. **Nellie McKay** *Normal As Blueberry Pie: A Tribute To Doris Day* (effortless old-fashioned pop)
12. **The Black Crowes** *Before The Frost...Until The Freeze* (roots rock enlivened by a live audience)
13. **Brad Paisley** *American Saturday Night* (country with a dash of humor)
14. **Allen Toussaint** *The Bright Mississippi* (casual jazz brilliance)
15. **Pearl Jam** *Backspacer* (the sound of veterans waking up)/**Green Day** *21st Century Breakdown* (worthy successor to American Idiot; really)
16. **Bassekou Kouyate** *I Speak Fula*/ **Vieux Farka Toure** *Fondo* (world class world music)
17. **Conor Oberst and the Mystic Valley Band** *Outer South* (Americana)/ **Elliott Brood** *Mountain Meadows* (Canadiana)/ **Low Anthem** *Oh My God, Charlie Darwin* (evolutionana)
18. **Alicia Keys** *The Element Of Freedom* (tougher beats; same talent)
19. **M. Ward** *Hold Time* (faithful pop)
20. **RZA** *Afro Samurai: Resurrection*/ **Raekwon** *Only Built For Cuban Linx...Part II* (keeping the lights on for hip-hop)
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22. **Monsters Of Folk** *Monsters Of Folk* (a super supergroup)
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33. **Geraint Watkins** *In A Bad Mood* (Randy Newman and Tom Waits' love child)
34. **Elvis Costello** *Secret, Profane & Sugarcane* (elder statesman can still deliver)
35. **Chip Taylor** *Yonkers NY* (story-song oddity)
36. **Tori Amos** *Midwinter Graces* (a holiday album for the ages)
37. **Diana Krall** *Quiet Nights* (Elvis's better half delivers again)
38. **The Black Hollies** *Softly, Towards The Light* (psychedelic nuggets)
39. **Mika** *The Boy Who Knew Too Much* (pure pop, with swagger)
40. **Rickie Lee Jones** *Balm In Gilead* (return to form)

The Best CDs of 2009

1. **The Avett Brothers** *I And Love And You* (Americana)/ **Regina Spektor** *Far* (quirky pop via Russian kitsch) -- Both of these acts have been garnering acclaim for a few albums. What I love here is how they both reach out to a wider audience without sacrificing the qualities that make them special. They're swinging for the fences -- and connecting, whether it's Spektor with her heart-stopping tune of faith on "Laughing With" or the Avett Brothers with that instant classic title track. And both are even better in concert. Two major talents who continue to blossom.
2. **Ella Fitzgerald** *Twelve Nights In Hollywood* (swinging jazz vocalese) -- Is Ella the greatest jazz singer of all time? This set puts her over the top in my book. Billie Holiday dealt with a lot of weak material early in her career and a weak voice late in her career. Dinah Washington was just as prolific in her way but always more of a force live than in the studio. Carmen McRae always swung it hard but never soft, Sarah Vaughan was like a delicious liqueur -- fine in small doses. But who can match Ella both for her recorded output and her live performances? Obviously, her Songbook albums are her masterpiece and indeed one of the masterpieces of popular music, along with Sinatra's concept albums for Capitol. But to hear these four CDs worth of music unearthed after so many decades is a revelation. Ella starts off at a gallop with "Lover Come Back To Me" and never lets up. Funny, charming, heartbreaking, joyful, scatting with ease, swinging with delight, Ella takes your breath away again and again. It's stunning. Just try and listen to it without smiling.
3. **Maxwell** *BLACKsummers'night* (Seventies soul) - Maxwell pulled a Sade and just like her, he returned to the spotlight after many years off without missing a beat. For young artists trying to stay current, that can seem impossible. For a classic talent like Maxwell, it's easy. Music like this concept album about a

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romance is simply timeless. It's the first in a proposed trilogy and I for one am chomping at the bit. Akin to Stevie Wonder in his heyday, and is there any higher compliment than that?

4. **Willie Nelson** *American Classic* (Stardust II) / **Rosanne Cash** *The List* (the Great American Songbook, country style) - There's still a prejudice in rock and roll about covers. Not so in country. Willie Nelson delivered his umpteenth sequel to his best-seller *Stardust*; it just so happens that this time he did it right. Meanwhile, Cash proves the singer in "singer-songwriter" can deliver too, with songs her father pinpointed as essential. So are both these albums.

5. **Madeleine Peyroux** *Bare Bones* / **Melody Gardot** *My One And Only Thrill* / **Kristina Train** *Spilt Milk* (songbirds, via Paris and Memphis) -- Sure, every artist wants to be dealt with on their own terms but it's only natural to compare one talent to another. So Peyroux is an heir to Billie Holiday but increasingly her own gal. Gardot is an heir to...well, Peyroux. And Train is clearly Blue Note's desire to mint another Norah Jones but she owes more to Dusty Springfield. All three deliver wonderfully.

6. **Mark Olson & Gary Louris** *Ready For The Flood* (Jayhawks redux) -- Oh how I love the Jayhawks. Just hearing these two voices wind around each other again is a pleasure. And thank goodness their album delivered on every level. I'm just surprised it wasn't more fussed over by the critics. Sheer delight.

7. **Mayer Hawthorne** *A Strange Arrangement* (blue eyed soul) -- Sometimes, you CAN discover an artist via the slush pile. There it was, just sitting there, with a note from an acquaintance insisting it was really good. Yeah right. But, hell, it really IS good, blue-eyed soul delivered with fervor and charm. Fun stuff.

8. **Loudon Wainwright** *High, Wide & Handsome: The Charlie Poole Project* (hilarious, heartfelt blues) -- Never been a huge fan of **Loudon Wainwright's** recordings, though he has a classic debut and is a fun live performer. His kids (Rufus and Martha), of course, are bursting with talent, thanks to Loudon as a dad and the late, great Kate McGarrigle as a mom. But here Loudon blossoms as never before. Poole's music suits him to a tee and he delivers these amusingly wry tunes of a ne'er do well with relish, sticking to suitably rustic arrangements that never seem retro, but rather just right. Great fun.

9. **The XX** *The XX* (boy-girl dynamics) / **Girls** *Album* (quietly ambitious rock) -- The two best debuts of the year. UK band The XX play off a boy-girl dynamic whereas Girls features all guys and an anything goes retro rock sound that jumbles 50s rock n roll with modern influences. You never can tell with new bands, but these are terrific debuts and I'm eager to hear more.

10. **Duncan Sheik** *Whisper House* (the real twilight soundtrack) -- What's a guy have to do to get some attention? Duncan Sheik has been a pop star and critics' darling. He's co-created a musical that turned into a Broadway smash and won every Tony in sight. He's paid obeisance to Nick Drake both in concert (where he's performed the album *Pink Moon* in its entirety) and on albums (where he resides in the same hushed world of confessional pop). And now he's working on multiple musical projects, including *The Emperor and the Nightingale* and this, which is about a haunted lighthouse. With all that, how come I didn't know about this CD of music for that work in progress until I saw it in a store? It's absorbing, wonderful stuff, perfect for fans of his musicals OR his increasingly sophisticated pop career.

11. **Nellie McKay** *Normal As Blueberry Pie: A Tribute To Doris Day* (effortless old-fashioned pop) -- Another talent destined for Broadway greatness, McKay has delivered several wonderfully quirky pop albums and is now collaborating on at least two or three musicals that have their eye on Broadway. I think the discipline of a musical and its storyline will be perfect for focusing her all-encompassing talent. But until one of those musicals appears we have this: her finest pop album to date. On it, McKay pays tribute to her idol, the perennially under-appreciated acting and singing talent Doris Day. McKay's arrangements of Day classics are wonderful and her vocals are marvelous. It's a tribute to both of them.

12. **The Black Crowes** *Before The Frost...Until The Freeze* (roots rock enlivened by a live audience) -- You'd think a pop music critic wouldn't be prejudiced but of course they are. I always dismissed the Black Crowes as anonymous Southern rock until I saw the two brothers performing an acoustic song on Letterman, where they blew me away. That set me up perfectly for appreciating this double album, much of which was recorded in front of a live audience and reveals their breadth of rustic talent AND their Southern rock skills.

13. **Brad Paisley** *American Saturday Night* (country with a dash of humor) -- Forget Zac Brown and his frightening mash-up of country music and jam bands. Paisley is the real heir apparent to Jimmy Buffett and a bigger talent in every way. This album was picked as #1 of the year by *Time* magazine, mostly as a nod to Paisley's great consistency over the past decade. He always delivers funny, witty, solid albums from beginning to end. But this charmer may be his best, thanks to an all-encompassing vision of

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America that celebrates immigrants and people of all stripes to rueful tunes about parenthood like "Anything Like Me." Whoever said country music was right wing never listened to the outlaws or to Paisley.

14. **Allen Toussaint** *The Bright Mississippi* (casual jazz brilliance) -- Toussaint dives into the history of jazz steeped in New Orleans, flavored with his own distinctive talent. A debut for Nonesuch and a notably exceptional one in his long career. Thank producer Joe Henry and great support throughout.

15. **Pearl Jam** *Backspacer* (the sound of veterans waking up)/**Green Day** *21st Century Breakdown* (worthy successor to American Idiot; really) -- Never been a huge fan of Pearl Jam, probably because I've never seen them live. But this short, sharp, shocked album of ferociously tuneful rock blew me away. That means hardcore fans will truly love it or be nonplussed. To me, they haven't sounded this raucous, this fun, this UN-sanctimonious since *Ten*. Everyone loved Green Day's *American Idiot*. But I think only Billy Joe wanted to see them become a latter day Who and turn out another concept album. If you just ignore the very modest concept album trappings, however, *21st Century Breakdown* is a terrific collection of great rock songs and a worthy followup. But please, no *Lighthouse* project.

16. **Bassekou Kouyate** *I Speak Fula*/ **Vieux Farka Toure** *Fondo* (world class world music) -- Kouyate is a master of the banjo-like precursor the ngoni while Vieux follows in the footsteps of his legendary father. Both produce world class world music, rooted in tradition without either closing themselves off to modern influences or feeling the need (like Bebel Gilberto) to stay current at the sake of quality.

17. **Conor Oberst and the Mystic Valley Band** *Outer South* (Americana)/ **Elliott Brood** *Mountain Meadows* (Canadiana)/ **Low Anthem** *Oh My God, Charlie Darwin* (evolutionana) -- It's an Americana hoedown showdown. I keep waiting for Oberst to stumble: he's too obvious an eccentric folkie, too obviously following in Dylan's footsteps (just like Dylan too obviously followed Woody Guthrie) and yet album after album he rewards my attention. Elliott Brood is a little known Canadian band I discovered in a bar when they were still self-releasing their music. They've grown by leaps and bounds and landed a label deal; they haven't quite broken through yet, but they will. And Low Anthem delivered a charmer that would probably place higher on my list if I hadn't just discovered it and only been album to play it a few times. "Charlie Darwin" is haunting and weird but much of it is thoroughly accessible Americana, which is to say country-ish, folk-ish but cool-ish rock n roll. Good stuff.

18. **Alicia Keys** *The Element Of Freedom* (tougher beats; same talent) -- Her new album came out rather quietly at the end of the year. Here Keys moves away from the melodic keyboard sound that made her name and focuses on rhythm and beats more. So when the album concludes with the melodic, keyboard driven "Empire State Of Mind" it feels like an emotional, artistic release that's quite moving. A serious talent.

19. **M. Ward** *Hold Time* (faithful pop) -- A protean talent, whether collaborating with actress Zoëy Deschanel on She & Him, the supergroup Monsters of Folk or his solo work. Here, Ward delivers songs that probe the mysteries and rewards of spirituality, all wrapped up in tunes that are effortlessly melodic.

20. **RZA** *Afro Samurai: Resurrection*/**Raekwon** *Only Built For Cuban Linx...Part II* (keeping the lights on for hip-hop) - Someone had to keep the lights on for hip-hop and in this down year, it was RZA and Raekwon who both delivered solid albums that weren't quite as revolutionary as their previous work but still welcome nonetheless.

21. **James Hand** *Shadow On The Ground* (honky-tonk to its bone) -- I'm not sure anyone has ever talked about James Hand without mentioning Hank Williams and I'm certainly not going to start now. Hand delivers honky tonk that is FIRMLY in the Hank Williams tradition and if it weren't so darn good, you'd dismiss it as aping the master. But it is darn good stuff, whether his excellent originals or some smart covers. Pure undistilled country.

22. **Monsters Of Folk** *Monsters Of Folk* (a super supergroup) -- I think the biggest musical trend of the past few years has been the cross-pollination of so many artists. Anyone with any sense has a portable or home recording studio that can deliver high quality sound and of course you can offer music to the world as long as you have high speed internet access. So why wouldn't people collaborate willy nilly? It's happening all over the place, such as this super group of members of My Morning Jacket, Bright Eyes and M. Ward. You'll think CSN more than Asia. Distinctive and good enough to make you certain this isn't a one-off but a real group like the Raconteurs.

23. **Brendan Benson** *My Old, Familiar Friend* (power pop) - Journeyman pop star Brendan Benson has had his fans of course. I enjoyed him when I heard him but never felt compelled to seek him out. But the Raconteurs put some spine in him, I think, because this solo album is his most cohesive and swaggering yet.

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24. **Various Artists** *Ghana Special: Modern Highlife, Afro Sounds & Ghanaian Blues 1968-1981* (Soundways, the world music label du jour, delivers again) - Soundways is the world music label that is currently delivering some of the smartest and nicely packaged pop music from around the world. Who else would put out three CDs of music from Panama? Ghana Special is one of their deluxe editions with gorgeous packaging and great song selections but you can't go wrong with anything by them right now.
25. **Matthew Sweet and Susanna Hoffs** *Under The Covers Vol. 2* (Seventies power pop done to perfection) - Even better than Vol. 1, this followup has the two really jamming on Seventies AM radio classics. Yeah, they often offer up the classic original arrangements with delight. So what? And hearing Hoffs drip with sexiness through "Bell Bottom Blues" or cooing "Let's go all the way" on the Raspberries gem is reward in and of itself. And Yes's "I've Seen All Good People" is a showstopper.
26. **Miranda Lambert** *Revolution* (a Nashville star)/ **Claire Lynch** *Whatcha Gonna Do* (bluegrass heaven) - Miranda Lambert was the THIRD runner-up on Nashville Star's first season. But she had a great song in her and her debut album was a surprise smash. It's been all uphill from there, as she's improved steadily as a singer and songwriter. Her third CD is her best yet, filled with independent gal lyrics the Dixie Chicks would love and enough melody for two Carrie Underwood albums. Claire Lynch is a bluegrass singer who's also come into her own. Fans of those other artists (or similar talent like Alison Krauss) should check them both out.
27. **Phoenix** *Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix* (college rock, but still good) - Everyone but everyone had Phoenix on their lists this year. The more I listened to their album the less certain I am about them. But they did have some killer singles and the sound was distinctive enough to keep me waiting patiently for their next CD and finding out whether they're a flash in the pan or genuine artists.
28. **Sufjan Stevens & Osso** *Run Rabbit Run* (instrumentals a la Glass) - I'm still waiting impatiently for the next album in Sufjan's (jokingly?) proposed 50 cd cycle of concept albums devoted to each state in the Union. This Glassian string of instrumentals devotes one track to each animal in the Chinese calendar years (Tiger, Rabbit, etc.) and proves - after a symphonic piece about a highway and a string of marvelous Christmas EPs) that Sufjan can indeed do anything.
29. **St. Vincent** *Actor* (quiet/loud/quiet/strange) -- This album keeps me off kilter. Sometimes it's soft and quiet, sometimes loud, sometimes rocking, sometimes folk-ish, sometimes experimental and sometimes all of these things in the same song. Kept me guessing and that's a good thing.
30. **Jay-Z** *The Blueprint 3* (luxury hip hop) - Third time was not quite the charm for me in this followup to the followup to his landmark album *The Blueprint*. Still, Jay-Z delivered some compelling moments (especially his wholesale lifting of that glorious Alicia Keys track) in a year when Hip hop really did seem dead.
31. **Jesse Winchester** *Love Filling Station* (journeyman troubadour delivers) - Thank you Elvis Costello for introducing me to Jesse Winchester. I'd vaguely heard of this singer-songwriter (and his classic debut CD) but never really gave him a lesson. But the moment he opened his mouth on Costello's TV show *Spectacle* I was stopped short by that wonderfully distinctive, appealing voice. **Then he performed instant classic "Sham-A-Ling-Dong-Ding"** and I had to get the album immediately. This new one seems to include some tunes in his repertoire for years but what of it? It's a winner.
32. **Prefab Sprout** *Let's Change The World With Music* (lost in the vaults gem) - I'm helpless when it comes to Prefab Sprout and the talents of singer songwriter Paddy McAloon. I've loved (almost) everything he's done since his debut CD *Swoon* in the mid-80s. Think Steely Dan crossed with Gershwin to get an idea of the pure pop genius of this artist. This album was the followup to his acclaimed *Jordan: The Comeback* which his label bizarrely rejected. Now we finally get to hear it with some minimal tweaking and it's glorious: like *Jordan*, it playfully deals with God and faith and love with tuneful romanticism. Religious belief has rarely been this catchy.
33. **Geraint Watkins** *In A Bad Mood* (Randy Newman and Tom Waits' love child) - A new one to me, suggested by my friend Sal, who has New Orleans in the blood. So does Geraint, who sets the tone nicely with "It's Easy To Say 'Bon Temps Rouler,'" an ode to happy times amidst heartache. Gentle rueful, tuneful.
34. **Elvis Costello** *Secret, Profane & Sugarcane* (elder statesman can still deliver) - Costello has always found rejuvenation in various genres. Here it's a return to Nashville, delivered in rootsy style thanks to producer T Bone Burnett and ace musicians. This one will grow in stature.
35. **Chip Taylor** *Yonkers NY* (story-song oddity) - I'd never heard word one about Chip Taylor till this album. It's an eccentric affair, with Taylor starting songs, stopping in the middle to tell a story and then

finishing up. Or telling a story and then singing the song. Or the reverse. Whatever his approach, it's got a winning "live album" feel for a new collection of memorable songs. Unique.

36. **Tori Amos** *Midwinter Graces* (a holiday album for the ages) - I devour holiday CDs and count myself lucky if an album can produce one good original Christmas or even one distinctive cover of a chestnut worth saving. This CD is the rare Christmas album that succeeds completely, combining oddly appealing re-imaginings of classic tunes like "Silent Night" and "Noel" with new songs. Far better than her new CD of secular tunes and probably my favorite Amos album of all.

37. **Diana Krall** *Quiet Nights* (Elvis's better half delivers again) - Krall is a fine pianist and singer but I didn't think she really shined until collaborating with arranger and producer Claus Ogerman on *The Look Of Love* in 2001. Whatever the reason, his pillow of strings brings out the best in her vocals. Eight years later they're working together again in the studio and the result is another gentle gem. Why she doesn't always work with him is beyond me.

38. **The Black Hollies** *Softly, Towards The Light* (psychedelic nuggets) - This Jersey psychedelic garage band is rooted in the Nuggets-era classics but somehow their music seems fresh instead of retro. They keep churning out this infectious gems and in a better world they'd be played on the radio all of the time instead of just once in a blue moon by the likes of Little Steven. Fun fun stuff.

39. **Mika** *The Boy Who Knew Too Much* (pure pop, with swagger) - To me, Mika's debut CD was a little over-praised, though infectious pop to be sure. Now his followup seems a little under-praised. I think he's grown on every level, though still basically just a delightful successor to the likes of Queen and George Michael. State of the art pop for those who still love it.

40. **Rickie Lee Jones** *Balm In Gilead* (return to form) - I always roll my eyes when Rolling Stone magazine dutifully gives four stars out of five to the latest albums by R.E.M. or Springsteen or U2 or indeed the Rolling Stones. It just seems a knee-jerk reaction to past glory rather than a fair assessment of their latest work. But beloved acts CAN come through again, such as Jones. She's followed up her wackiest album (a beatnik-y spoken word sort of religious tract) with one of her warmest and most accessible CDs. It's easily her best since *Flying Cowboys*. If you've been a fan, don't hesitate.

THE BEST BOXED SETS OF 2009

The Beatles *Mono* - Obviously, the event of the year if not the decade musically was the remastering of the Beatles catalog. But it wasn't just improved sound. We finally got to hear their albums in mono, the way the Beatles intended, for the first time really since the albums came out in the Sixties. The 70s LPs and the cassettes and CDs I grew up with were all based on the stereo mixes, which were afterthoughts for the Beatles. (Only *Let It Be* and *Abbey Road* were released only in stereo originally.) This isn't a minor point because the mono mixes are substantially different. It's like seeing classic films by your favorite director and finding out that in the original cut the scenes were ordered differently, actors came in at different moments and even spoke different lines. It's especially mind-blowing on *The White Album*, which now seems to me even more magnificent. *Sgt. Pepper* sounds so remarkable that for the first time I actually did listen to it and think THAT'S their masterpiece (rather than *Revolver* or *Abbey Road* or *The White Album*, depending on my mood). Still the greatest band of all and they always will be.

Neil Young *Archives* - I bet there are people who still clutch onto some beloved CD-ROM. Some very clever companies released great products in that format. Neil Young designed this boxed set for the BluRay and while I'm almost certain this is a cul de sac rather than the future of music boxed sets, it's an awfully tantalizing one that overflows with information. It's literally like an encyclopedia of the era for Young. Overwhelming. He just grows in stature for me year after year.

Buddy Holly *Not Fade Away: The Complete Studio Recordings And More* - I've been waiting for this boxed set since literally the advent of CDs. I would read in the Rolling Stone Record Guide about the five star review of the LP equivalent to this and just chomp at the bit to get my hands on it, never imagining it would be 25 years (!!) before they'd get around to it. Nothing could be quite worth the wait and much of this has come out in smaller sets in the last few years. But it's still amazing to see the explosive growth of Holly. Has anyone ever had such massive influence with so little actual output? Not even Hendrix or Nick Drake can match him.

Dolly Parton *Dolly* - The most amazing fact about this 4 CD 99 song boxed set of one of music's most talented songwriters and singers is that it's incomplete. It stops in 1991, before her amazing string of bluegrass albums that serve as a career peak to equal her best. Her place in country and pop history is assured and she doesn't seem even remotely done yet. And when all is said and done, it's the catalog of songs that she's created that will prove her most enduring legacy. What a talent. And I STILL haven't

seen her in concert or interviewed her. Kills me.

Woody Guthrie *My Dusty Road* - The sonic upgrade of Woody Guthrie's catalog is very welcome and notable indeed. You simply cannot argue with music this enduring and entertaining. But on a practical level, I have to acknowledge this is kind of a rip. This music is 60 years old. So what excuse is this for spreading out this short tunes onto 4 CDs? (They contain 13, 14, 12 (twelve!!) and 15 tracks and those could easily fit onto 2 CDs.) The result is an \$80 set that should have cost \$40 and come out on 2 discs. The more people that can afford and hear his music the better. But this set, as sterling as it sounds, ignores that. Amazon sells it on download for \$37, but really, is the physical CD that much of an afterthought these days?

THE BEST REISSUES OF 2009

The Stone Roses *The Stone Roses* - I keep forgetting that a lot of Americans don't really know this album, which is a landmark in the UK. It is swirling, hypnotic absolutely essential rock n roll.

Rosemary Clooney *Blue Rose* and *Love* - It's almost impossible to do anymore, but I found myself in J&R Music World in NYC actually browsing the aisles of a record store fully stocked in all sorts of genres and finding stuff I didn't even know I wanted. Case in point: these two CDs from Clooney. *Blue Rose* is a collaboration with Duke Ellington that was reissued in 2008 while *Love* is arranged and produced by her lover Nelson Riddle. Both are absolutely peak, peak recordings that raise Clooney in my estimation. (I've been more familiar with her late period renaissance on Concord.) The most amazing thing is that both CDs were under \$10. *Blue Rose* was actually \$7. Seven dollars!! I was THRILLED to buy it at that price. Think the record labels are missing a beat by keeping catalog titles at such high prices?

Freddie Hubbard *Without A Song: Live in Europe 1969* - A swinging set from one of jazz's great trumpeters. A welcome reminder of jazz's potency in a year so devoid of excitement in that genre.

The Jayhawks *Music From The North Country* - The new collaboration between Mark Olson and Gary Louris is so successful, it made all the nicer to dive into this anthology for a band that hasn't quite received its due yet.

EARLY FAVORITES OF 2010

Midlake *The Courage Of Others*

Corinne Bailey Rae *The Sea*

Chieftains *St. Patricio*

Josh Rouse *El Turista*

Dee Dee Bridgewater *Eleanora Fagan (1915-1959): To Billie With Love From Dee Dee*

Can't wait for:

Sharon Jones & The Dap Kings *I Learned The Hard Way*

Willie Nelson *Country Music*

Raul Midon *Synthesis*

Johnny Cash *American VI: Ain't No Grave*

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DMohr 10:57 AM on 2/16/2010



112 Fans

Madeleine Peyroux's covers album "Careless Love" is one of my 10 favorite albums of the past decade, but her latest album of all-new material "Bare Bones" was one of my biggest disappointments of 2009 (along with the new U2 album). Peyroux is simply nowhere near as talented of a songwriter as she is a vocalist.

My favorite records of 2009:

Andrew Bird - Noble Beast

The Dead Weather - Horehound (even better than the White Stripes' "Icky Thump" LP)

Forro in the Dark - Light a Candle

Serge Gainsbourg - Histoire de Melody Nelson (reissue)

Gilles Peterson (fantastic British DJ on BBC) - Brazilika

Alice Russell - Pot of Gold

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astrozombie 10:01 AM on 2/16/2010

0 Fans

Just a quick correction on your Phoenix entry. Their latest album "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart" is actually their fourth studio album.

<http://allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:difyxqlkdde~T2>

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astrozombie 02:18 AM on 2/17/2010

0 Fans

Whoops! And a quick correction on my entry: "Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix" not "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart".

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 05:03 AM on 2/17/2010

59 Fans



Thanks for the catch. I've corrected 'second" to "next" album.

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ptillen 09:56 PM on 2/15/2010

7 Fans

I would like to add my recommendation, the recent Grammy award winner for best jazz vocal performance, Kurt Elling's "Dedicated to You: Kurt Elling Sings the Music of Coltrane and Hartman" http://kurtelling.com/music/dedicated_to_you/

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 10:17 PM on 2/15/2010
59 Fans



Thanks for the suggestion. The John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman collaboration is one of my all-time favorites so I'll check it out.

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Xenussister 09:37 PM on 2/15/2010

14 Fans

In the "It's Never Too Late to Hear Great Music" vein, do a YouTube search for Happy Rhodes (her real name), for instance, "Temporary and Eternal." Here's a woman with a phenomenal, gorgeous voice (4 octave range), beautiful music, interesting lyrics, has been making music for over 25 years, has 11 wonderful, high-quality albums, but is totally obscure. Not because she's not fiercely talented, but because she's never been on a major record label, and because she's too much of a homebody to go out on the road for whirlwind national tours. She prefers her husband, cats and farm to tours, fame and glory. There's nothing wrong with that. But she is a world-class talent and it is a shame she isn't better-known.

She's not in it for the money, all 11 albums are on YouTube as audio-only tracks, and elsewhere as streaming audio. There are several dozen live clips too if anyone's interested. Maybe one day something will happen, the timing will be right, and she'll be discovered. Her fascinating story will be told and her incredible music will be heard. Or, maybe not. But the music is there, timeless and patiently waiting.

(She's not making music currently so I'm not promoting anything. I've been a fan for 21 years and want others to hear her. Not to benefit Happy, or myself, but because I know how her music has touched people's lives.)

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 10:18 PM on 2/15/2010
59 Fans



Never heard of her so I'm intrigued. Thanks for the tip.

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Xenussister 06:00 AM on 2/17/2010

14 Fans

Thank you for saying so, I appreciate it. Of course, I'm ridiculously biased, so my opinion doesn't mean much, but I think her voice and her music speaks for itself. It isn't that one or two songs shine, it's a whole body of work, since 1986, when she started releasing her first 4 albums on hand-dubbed cassettes, to 2007, when she self-released her 11th album (after being on 2 different indie labels in between). If you do listen, and if you do like what you hear, I can pretty much guarantee that the more you hear, the more impressed you'll be. Some may not be to your taste, her albums are eclectic. There's very lush, layered and electronic (Many Worlds Are Born Tonight), and there's simple, quiet and peaceful (The Keep), and there's odd pop (Building The Colossus) and others. Always original, but always pure Happy Rhodes. Some...ok, a lot of her songs are dark and scary, and many are not, but they're always about things, either storytelling or very personal. She doesn't do love songs. Many, if not most, are very psychological, which makes sense the more you know about Happy the person. She's got a hell of a backstory. She's got a dark and fun sense of humor too.

Anyway, I wouldn't want to drive you away by being too talky. My enthusiasm can easily get out of control and cause people to back off. I'm harmless, just passionate. :) Happy knows.

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Xenussister 06:26 AM on 2/17/2010

14 Fans

Two more things...

If you do get a chance to listen, and if you do get interested (and I would understand if you don't because of different tastes), and want to know more about her, there's a bit more information of the MySpace page I put up for her and maintain since she's not much of an internet person (<http://www.myspace.com/happyrhodes>). It doesn't go into too much depth, but it covers many of the basics.

And second, I was very rude by not even commenting on your blog here, which I did read and enjoyed. I'm a female vocals fan, so I read those first. What I like most is that it's so eclectic, from the wonderful Regina Spektor to Nellie McKay (Nellie does Doris? Oh my god, how did I not know about this? Thank you for telling me) to Tori (who, btw, is a Happy Rhodes fan) to Ella to Rosemary to Madeleine to Melody to Rickie Lee to St. Vincent, wow. I knew all of them, but I hadn't heard of Kristina Train, and just the mention of Dusty Springfield is enough to interest me. I used to have a radio show featuring female vocals, and I'd play everyone from Billie to Diamanda Galas, Kate Bush to Rickie Lee, kd lang (way before she was famous) to Lotte Lenya. I love eclectic. I have huge disagreements with you concerning movies, but music-wise, I love your eclectic taste.

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lehi Aour 06:11 PM on 2/15/2010

66 Fans

There is no shortage of praise for Ella, but your simplistic take on Billie Holiday begs a rebuttal. That she was given only "weak" material early in her career, does not at all address why. That would involve an explanation, for those who do not know, of the relationship between songwriters, publishers and singers in her time, and just who it was that would have been given access to the more superior songs of the time.

Lady Day's magic is singular. She transformed that weak material into a superior expression. Her ability to tweak a melody, to "worry" a phrase (as the blues people put it) her sense of the dynamic, all these things practically inform all the singers in her wake. It isn't always about range, as a double dozen "vocalists" today just ought to learn, but about how one plays the rhythm. Billie Holiday's sense of time was nothing less than praeternatural. Just simply try and sing along with her. Her recordings with Lester Young are absolutely magical. It is criminal that they were only able to work together for the short period that they did.

Nellie McKay is absolutely wonderful. Diana Krall hurts my ears.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 10:21 PM on 2/15/2010
59 Fans



Thanks for weighing in. Of course I had to be simplistic in a brief paragraph. But take it as a given that I'm a huge fan of all the singers I mentioned, including of course the great Billie Holiday. I own every legal recording ever released of hers: all the complete boxed sets and love them all for various reasons. No library is complete without her. Taking that as a given, I was just suggesting that since Ella so quickly moved beyond "A-Tisket" to classic standards (indeed, helping to cement those standards as the great American songbook as much as anyone) and her much longer career of high quality that maybe she edged out Billie in the silly but fun contest of comparing two amazing talents and ranking them. But of course no history of jazz is complete without either of them.

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lehi Aour 12:29 AM on 2/16/2010

66 Fans

One of my favorite performances on record is "Ella in Berlin" when she forgets the lyric of "Mac The Knife" and wings it, swinging harder than likely if she did not forget. For Lady Day, it is hard to choose between, "He's Funny That Way" and "I'll Never Be The Same", the fondant on those two cakes being some of the most exquisite Pres on record.

Indeed, any choice on a moment's notice, in that company, will not disappoint. Any

Dinah live material is amazing for that laser like reading of the lyric. I'm gonna stop here, but thanks for the info. You ever list Joan Armatrading?

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TimLB 06:01 PM on 2/15/2010

29 Fans

May I suggest Wild Beasts 'Two Dancers'? The XX's debut is fantastic. Must listen material.

And I'm with you on the Stone Roses remaster. State of the art!

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 10:21 PM on 2/15/2010

59 Fans



A new one to me; thanks for the tip.

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djwfutbol 04:09 PM on 2/15/2010

8 Fans

That Rickie Lee Jones CD was gawd-awful. So, I take your other recommendations with a big grain of salt, my friend. I admire your enthusiasm, though. Music is the bomb, good and bad.

How about a little K'Naan - Troubador? Was that released this year?

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 10:27 PM on 2/15/2010

59 Fans



May I make a suggestion? I never agree -- or rarely agree -- with every item on a best of the year list be it in movies or music or theater or tv or books or whatever. So I look for people with tastes I seem to be in sync with. If you've listened to and liked four or five of the artists on this list (maybe you're a country fan and like Paisley or a blues fan and like Loudon's take on Charlie Poole), then you might look for something I recommend that you haven't listened to yet and think it might be worth clicking on the link. That's all. I'll bet if you made a list and I liked five or six of the artists on it that I might be able to discover someone else i'd like to. Thinking someone's opinion is useless just because you hated one out of the 51 albums I listed in the main section means you might dismiss most lists by most critics ever. On the other hand, if you see me listing artist after artist you don't like or crap albums by a lot of artists you do like that didn't do their best work that year, then of course you'd be right to not pay attention. But people with taste I admire invariably recommend something I don't care for or can't understand why I praise something. It happens.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 10:32 PM on 2/15/2010

59 Fans



Oh, and I forgot. I've seen K'Nann's name a few times on best of lists but couldn't find the CD in any local stores before finishing my own (though I did spend loads of money trying to fill in my gaps). I will definitely check it out.

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ktano0 03:36 PM on 2/15/2010

10 Fans

A very thoughtful and well-written list. Thanks for directing me to the Ella set.

I haven't heard all of the CD's mentioned of course, but of the ones I have you nailed the qualities beautifully. That Sweet/Hoffs CD is a delight, with Lindsey Buckingham and Steve Howe playing the their guitar parts on their songs (if I'm not mistaken.) Pearl Jam was fantastic, as was the Monsters of Folk. I'll definitely check out the other recommendations.

Damn, now I wish I had bought the mono Beatles....

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 10:28 PM on 2/15/2010
59 Fans



The Mono Beatles is very available if very expensive. But worth every penny. Start socking away those coins! Thanks for reading.

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losangelian1 02:38 PM on 2/15/2010

8 Fans

Love The XX. Since the first listen, this one has been on my playlist non-stop. Will have to check out "Girls."

Also, liked Grizzly Bear "Veckatimest" quite a bit. Interesting, complicated, kind of haunting melodies. The song "Two Weeks" is worth the price of the album alone.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 10:29 PM on 2/15/2010
59 Fans



I liked the Grizzly Bear too, but not quite enough to get on my already lengthy list, though "Two Weeks" is certainly a highlight. Animal Collective, Super Furry Animals, Cass McCombs and plenty of others got a look see. The bottom of my story has a link to my website which takes you to my blog which regularly updates everything I listen to with a quick star rating if you're so inclined. Thanks for reading! I think you'll like Girls if you like XX. Both very worthy.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER

CheapTrick 01:02 AM on 2/15/2010
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Best album last year was the new Cheap Trick album "The Latest." Fantastic from start to finish, not a stinker in the bunch.

And as much as it pains me to say it, Susan Boyle's "I Dreamed a Dream" is haunting, under-stated, and displays a vulnerable and delicate voice. I'm still amazed that a classic rock fan like me loved it so much.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz 10:31 PM on 2/15/2010
59 Fans



You're the third person to mention the Cheap Trick album to me. I will definitely be checking it out. And are you kidding about the Susan Boyle is it indeed lovely? I didn't care for any of her live performances but anything is possible and I do try to (gulp) keep an open mind.

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