

THE BLOG

Grammy Preview: The Actual Best Albums Of 2015

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Hey, the Grammys are no better or worse than the Oscars or the Emmys or the National Book Awards. They rarely pick your actual favorite album/movie/TV show/book of the year. But give them credit: for the last few years, out of the nominations they made, the Grammys have actually been picking ones I liked a lot.

Arcade Fire won in 2011 (I would have been happy with Eminem, too), Adele beat a sad lot in 2012, Mumford & Sons won in 2013 (Frank Ocean would have been cooler, but still), Daft Punk had their moment in 2014, and Beck's excellent *Morning Phase* topped another sad lot in 2015.

So come February 15, I actually have high hopes that Kendrick Lamar's brilliant *To Pimp A Butterfly* will be awarded Album Of The Year. Heck, most critics would agree it's the best of the year and the Grammys and the critics *rarely* agree. (And if it's an upset, I'd be thrilled with Chris Stapleton's *Traveller*; less so with Alabama Shakes - but please, no Taylor Swift or The Weeknd.)

Yes, two of the albums nominated for Grammy's top prize are actually in my top 5 for the best albums of the year. So to celebrate music's big night, here's a list of my favorite albums of the year, followed by some early ear candy from 2016 and then a brief rundown of what I love about each album and a video for the Top 10 so you can check them out. (For the rest, you know, go to YouTube.) Enjoy!

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2015

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COWBOY JUNKIES - *Notes Falling Slowly*
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DANIEL ROMANO - *If I've Only One Time Askin'*
ADELE -- *25*

THE MAVERICKS - *Mono*
ANDERSON EAST - *Delilah*
DON HENLEY - *Cass County*
CAGE THE ELEPHANT - *Tell Me I'm Pretty*
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EARLY FAVORITES OF 2016

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JAMES HUNTER - *Hold On!*
DORI FREEMAN -- *Dori Freeman*
M. WARD - *More Rain*

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2015 - THE LINER NOTES

1. **SUFJAN STEVENS** - *Carrie & Lowell* My year in music began very well indeed, with several albums blowing me away. Then this came out and I said to myself, "It's over." To my shock, it didn't even appear on Rolling Stone's list of the 50 Best Albums of 2015, when of course it should have been #1. At least it was in the Top 10 and the Village Voice's vaunted Pazz And Jop poll. (If you're wondering, I've heard most everything on the RS list and much in the Top 100 of the Pazz poll.) Maybe you're not familiar with Stevens? He delivered what is widely considered one of the best albums of the 2000s: *Come On Feel The Illinoise*, a sprawling, everything-but-the-kitchen-sink masterpiece as ambitious and exciting and diverse in style and form as one could ask. This is it's polar opposite. I first heard it under ideal conditions: driving in a car, late at night on a darkened highway with no idea of what it was like other than "the new Sufjan Stevens." Turns out it's a 3 in the morning, Nick Drake sort of album, fragile and quiet and when it was finished, I thought, "Well, somebody died!" Lyrically, musically, emotionally, the Angel of Death hovers over this one and blesses it with the beat of its wings. Turns out the mother of Stevens did in fact die and this album grapples with that. Becoming an orphan (or a semi-orphan if your other parent is still alive) is always notable. But Stevens reportedly had a complicated relationship with her, to say the least. It's a testament to the work that I didn't know any of this but felt churned up emotionally, almost holding my breath at certain songs, afraid to break the spell. It's no less sonically ambitious than *Illinoise* but that boldness is far more subtle here. Stevens and the people recording with him do remarkable things here with analog, the hiss of audio, the *textures* of recording that others can appreciate and break down better than me. All I know is listening to the album is a transfixing experience. Is it depressing? Not at all. Any art that tackles

deep, dark issues and can produce a lasting work is to me a joyful act, however sad the story at hand. *Illinoise* was hailed with hosannas the moment it arrived. This one will grow in stature and endure. It's a thing of rare beauty.

2. **JILL SCOTT** - *Woman* I think I love Jill Scott. She's smart and sexy and frank and funny and her new album is just the latest to declare her brilliance at picking up where Prince left off. "Closure" makes me laugh every time I listen to it but the pleasures to be had are many: gospel, blues, pop, soul, spoken word, the personal and the political. It's all here and all good. How many more excellent albums does she have to create before people wake up to her talent?

3. **KENDRICK LAMAR** - *To Pimp A Butterfly* This is it, the album anointed the best of the year by the critics and - who knows - maybe even the Grammys on Monday. It's a stellar follow-up to *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City*. Lamar took the success of that album and ran with it, working in live

musicians, jazz, soul, pop and pretty much everything else you can think of into his "state of the union" masterpiece. No, let's not call it his masterpiece because I think he's just getting started? You've been digging the cast album to Hamilton, marveling at how hip-hop can illuminate the complexity of America back in 1776? Check this out to hear how it illuminates America in 2016.

4. **CHRIS STAPLETON** -- *Traveller* -- What are they drinking in Nashville. Every year seems to bring up a new winner for Sturgill Simpson in 2014 to this absolute killer album in 2015. Unlike Simpson, the wheel remains the same -- no reinvention here. Just great songs, great musicianship, great singing. Except for the maudlin "Daddy Doesn't Pray Anymore" -- a traditional country tune in the bad sense, right down to the "surprise" twist at the end -- this is a sheer pleasure.

5. **THE TALLEST MAN ON EARTH** - *Dark Bird Is Home* It's been a decade now that I've been digging this artist, a guy from Sweden who

sings in English, plays the guitar with flair, digs Dylan and Guthrie, has a folkie vibe and yet from the start has followed his own melodic, rock and roll heart. I can't say he keeps getting better because he started out sensationally good. But he has been slowly, gently expanding his musical range. First it seemed like it was just him and a guitar. An EP followed by an album and then another EP and then another album, each one opening up to a fuller sound without ever sacrificing the pure lyricism that has struck a chord with fans worldwide. This growth has been so gradual that when his new album includes a full band and the first track opens up wider and wider with sound it feels like a movie that suddenly expands into Panavision. (See Xavier Dolan's *Mommy* for the cinematic idea I'm driving at.) Really, it's not that radical: if you're new to him, you'll just hear a terrific, lovely, actually rather restrained work of folkish rock and roll bursting with great tunes, incisive lyrics and winning vocals, always anchored by his sterling guitar work. For long time fans like myself, it's like being launched into space. Catch him before he goes into orbit.

6. **COURTNEY BARNETT** - *Sometimes I Just Sit And Think And*

Sometimes I Just Sit As good as it is, I'm a little wary of this. The poor woman had barely released an EP when she was being dubbed the new Dylan. This debut album was immediately clobbered with hype that said we could now expect decades of brilliant work from this amazing artist. Leave her alone! Can't we just let her actually produce some music first before shoving Joni Mitchell and Neil Young aside in the pantheon of greats? Truth be told, humor has never been a valued commodity in rock and roll and Barnett is hilarious. So her immediate acceptance is welcome. She's got a deadpan delivery and some really amusing lyrics and a beguiling guitar style that's so direct you'd think it was indirect, if that makes any sense. I'm not sure how much this music will bear repeating but it sure was a hoot on first blush. It's compelling, strange, wonderfully weird and all that. I'm just worried the next album will be

compelling, strange and wonderfully weird in all the same ways, a la a one-trick pony. There's no denying it's hugely effective but I'd like to delay the coronation for a while, please. Now let her tour and develop and let's see what she comes up with next.

7. TONY BENNETT AND BILL CHARLAP - *The Silver Lining* One of the greats, Tony Bennett has sold more albums, won more Grammys and made more new fans as a senior citizen than he ever did before. The pity is that most of his recent albums can't hold a candle to his best. Even though I was tickled as much as anyone to see him on *MTV Unplugged*, that live album was not the artistic peak of his career. And I shudder to think many fans own *Duets* and nothing else. Still, his album with kd lang back in 2002 was a gem. And now we've got another one to celebrate. This collaboration with pianist Bill Charlap of course harkens back to one of the absolute peaks in his recording career: the two albums Bennett did with the great Bill Evans. This delight is damn near as good as those and those are about as good as Bennett gets. They're paying tribute to Jerome Kern and while his voice may be rough with age, he can zero in on a lyric like nobody's business. Charlap (who has done the same on two great albums with his mom, singer Sandy Stewart) is an accompanist who can swing and provides an ideally sympathetic partner for Bennett. The irony is that Bennett has been so lauded in recent years that now when he really does deserve the Grammy for Best Jazz Vocal Album, he may get overlooked. Don't you do the same.

8. **THE FRATELLIS** - *Wide Eyed Tongue Tied* Hey guys, my bad. Sorry I lost track of you. You're one of the best Scottish rock bands around. Scratch that - you're one of the best rock bands around, period. I was crazy about your debut album *Costello Music...*and then you slipped from view. Side projects, a band hiatus and three albums later, I finally caught up with you and this faultless CD reminded me exactly why I went nuts the first time around. Now if you'll just come to town, I can finally see you in concert. I promise, I won't forget.

9. **IRIS DEMENT** - *The Trackless Woods* Okay, it's an unlikely project, I guess and Dement has had a fitful, wandering career. She burst onto the folk scene from Arkansas, with a voice so big it was almost startling and sterling songwriting that immediately caught the ear of everyone from the folks on *Northern Exposure* to the band 10,000 Maniacs, which covered her. Her second album won me from the opening track "Sweet Is The Melody" and never let go. She was on *A Prairie Home Companion*. She received acclaim. Then she recorded an overtly political album and -- never one for the star-making machinery -- Dement stepped away. Some 16 years later, she reappeared with a marvelous album of originals because she'd had a family and it was time. So to capitalize on that momentum, she has now put out an album of songs using lyrics pulled from the Russian poetry of Anna Akhmatova. Of course! Others translated the poems, Dement set them to music and recorded it with piano and

some modest guitar accompaniment. It's out on her own record label because everyone else probably thought she was plumb crazy. Well, it works a dream. Her melodies seem wedded to the words as if they were born together. The songs have a dark beauty Dement seems to have been preparing to capture her entire career. It's strangely foreign and yet familiar at the same time. If you've ever had the slightest interest in Dement, give a listen. You'll be searching out her other CDs and the work of this giant of Russian poetry as soon as it's ended.

10. **IKE REILLY** -- *Born On Fire* I could pretend I know all about Ike Reilly but the truth is that this rock and roll gem just blew me away and I had to play some serious catch-up on this talented artist who's apparently been turning out some damn good music for years with me being none the wiser. Hell, I'm playing the title track while I write this and it's so good I'm getting a contact high even though it's the 20th or so time I've spun it lately and that joint should be dead by now. It's a positively heart-warming ode to Reilly's child and it should be piped into every newborn nursery in every hospital in the world. I hear Springsteen, I hear John Hiatt, but mostly I hear a veteran act burning with great songs, great talent and a great hunger to get it down on tape long after a lesser man might have given up in the face of inattention. It's raucous, catchy, exhilarating and kicks ass. Think a rowdier *Bring The Family*. Now where can I buy all those earlier Ike Reilly albums, pronto?

11. **KAMASI WASHINGTON** - *The Epic Jazz?* Jazz. Other than vocalists, I've sorely lost the thread when it comes to the best jazz artists working out there right now. Much of the blame is my own, but certainly jazz has simply not commanded the attention of even the cognoscenti for a while now, however deserving individual acts might be. It takes a major talent to wake up the world to the ever-vital artistry that jazz can embody. Enter tenor saxophonist and composer Kamasi Washington, who has such undeniable chops he looks set to single-handedly demand folk dig jazz again. His album is a 3 CD epic in every sense and it deserves every accolade it's received. It makes me almost ashamed to think of the jazz albums of the last few years I've missed out on. It's sprawling, all-embracing and just plain fun, covering the waterfront by including everything from 70s funk soundtrack to Coltrane's spirituality to Louis Armstrong's concise swing. Caveat: each album has one vocal track (I'm not including the spoken word track in this assessment) and they're not just up to the level of the other music - no, they are positively dreadful. It's as if someone just slapped in some god-awful music from another planet just to mess with us. What is up with them? They're easily ignored and surely everyone will skip them the second, third and one hundredth time they play this album. Washington is the shape of things to come in jazz and happily we're all paying attention now.

12. **BOZ SCAGGS** - *A Fool to Care* Scaggs has been in the zone lately, with two excellent albums of standards followed by Memphis and now A Fool To Care, nominally a New Orleans-inspired work. Like his best work since the commercial peak of Silk Degrees, it's so casually good you almost don't realize that until suddenly you've spun it 10 or 20 times and it keeps getting better.

13. **KACEY MUSGRAVES** - *Pageant Material* Country artist Musgraves doubles down on her solid debut Same Trailer, Different Park and proves she belongs right up there with Miranda Lambert and Brad Paisley with lyrics that are spot-on and pretty damn hilarious too. A real comer.

14. **LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA** - *Hamilton Original Cast Album* It's a phenomenon and you really haven't lived until you hear the voice of your friend's two little kids (eight and younger) floating in from the kitchen and spontaneously breaking out with, "We're reliable with the *la-dies!*" Having seen the show, the album feels more of a keepsake to me, a prod to the

memory of what I enjoyed in the theater. So I never expected how completely it would cross over to people who never make it to Broadway and rarely if ever listen to hip-hop. Multiple plays do let you savor the brilliant lyrics, though the pleasure of that may be dimmed for students since hip history teachers will be playing excerpts in class for generations to come.

15. **ORANGE HUMBLE BAND** - *Depressing Beauty* So good, you'd swear it was a reissue. Slap on this album (if you can find it) and you'll hear an early 1970s, Big Star vibe. Track down who it is (the album came to me via a friend) and lo and behold it's a super group of artists beloved by those in the know, including folks from the Posies and yes Big Star, among others. I hope it's on streaming services because this power pop gem has apparently barely surfaced in record stores. Now I need to dig out their earlier releases, which apparently are just as good.

16. **COWBOY JUNKIES** - *Notes Falling Slowly* Few acts enjoy the universal praise that greeted the debut album of Cowboy Junkies. It was all deserved though they've labored in the shadow of the hushed majesty of *The Trinity Sessions* ever since. I believe Michael Timmins is an exceptional songwriter (especially good at writing for women) and their music proved consistently solid to me longer than most paid attention. But yeah, they drifted off my radar. So what's this boxed set? A mélange of re-mastering and re-recording of several recent albums and essentially a new album culled from the sessions that produced them? WTF? Well, I haven't done a thorough comparison yet of those re-thought albums but the de facto new release is terrific, offering the sonic kick that this act could always deliver live. Pay attention. Again.

17. **TINARIWEN** - *Live In Paris, 2014* How embarrassing the lack of world music. I've imagined for a few years that when economic times are tough, our musical horizons shrink. We've less time to explore musical byways around the world. Literally, I've found less world music to even sample in the nutty, roundabout way I listen to music (press contacts, friends, purchases and no streaming because I'm a fuddy duddy). In desperation, I turned to Tinariwen, a band from the Sahara, literally appearing out of the desert, he said in a Western appeal to exoticism. I keep thinking this Tuareg group that combined electric guitar with traditional vocals and instrumentation would prove a fad, the sort of world music group that has a brief faddish heyday and then drops out of sight. But they keep delivering strong albums and this live album is no exception. Keep proving me wrong.

18. **CARRIE UNDERWOOD** - *Storyteller* When you're looking for brassy country music that offers the kick of pop but isn't desperate to cross

over, Underwood delivers. Her body of work is increasingly impressive.

19. **TAME IMPALA** - *Currents* That moment when your nephew hears you natter on about Sufjan Stevens (hadn't heard of him) and The Tallest Man On Earth (loves them, thanks to your recommendation) and then casually asserts, "But of course the best album of the year is by Tame Impala." You nod noncommittally, rush out and start listening. Darned if he wasn't on to something.

20. **AMY LAVERE AND WILL SEXTON** - *Hallelujah, I'm A Dreamer* Yes, we remain in a golden age for duets albums and here's the latest example. I was just catching up with LaVere and her excellent *Runaway's Diary* and here she is with a duets album featuring her husband, guitarist Will Sexton, which blew me away. It confirms her huge talent and now I'm kicking myself for not seeing them on tour.

21. **DRAKE** -- *If You're Reading This, It's Too Late* He lost me there for a moment; the bitching about fame became a little tiresome. (Not to mention the constant references to bitches.) Somehow he's regained his sense of humor despite the burden of celebrity remaining topic number one. And his vocals remain killer in their ability to put a spin on quotidian lines like, "I got bitches askin' me about the code for the Wi-Fi!" The way he groans "waa-faa" is priceless and his new album has countless touches like that. He isn't going anywhere.

22. **SARA BAREILLES** - *What's Inside: Songs From Waitress* Okay, I know you've been listening to *Hamilton* nonstop but the Broadway album that has me captivated is this precursor to the new musical *Waitress*. Sure, I was beaten into submission by the single "Brave" by Bareilles. But that didn't prepare me for this labor of love, an album of songs she wrote for the show based on the indie film about a woman who escapes an abusive man thanks to her baking pies. (See it.) I had no expectations but the opening track with it's haunting, lovely "Sugar...sugar, butter...sugar, butter, flour" chorus wowed me to no end. Track after track did what songs in a great musical should do: set the scene, reveal characters, advance the plot and all in tunes you want to sing along with right away. I am very excited to see the show when it opens and now very excited by what Bareilles will do next as a recording artist.

23. **JASON ISBELL** -- *Something More Than Free* Isbell follows up his hugely acclaimed *Southeastern* with this very worthy CD. The praise was deserved and he's proven it can spur him on to more great work. A companion piece, the next chapter, call it what you will. But anyone who enjoyed *Southeastern* or meant to get around to listening to it has a new album to add to their to-do list.

24. **VINCE STAPLES** - *Summertime '06* Listening to music on your phone is pretty weird when it gets right down to it. One result is that the names of artists and albums make less of an impression than the days when you held a CD or LP in your hand and saw the record label and a picture of the act and read liner notes and so on. Plus, there's just so damn much of it. Which explains how I had a Vince Staples album on my phone but somehow had it in my head that this new act was some sort of Americana artist. Then I played it and my head did a 360 as this rap artist let fly. Once I recovered my equilibrium, I realized he was a damn good rap act, nipping at the heels of Drake. He never ran from anything, except the police? Hilarious, pointed and smart.

25. **VERUCA SALT** - *Ghost Notes* Sometimes you just want to rock out and this year it was Veruca Salt (and the Fratellis) that let me do so.

26. **LOS LOBOS** - *Gates Of Gold* A legacy act. Hall of Famers. Call them what you will. Somehow I've never seen Los Lobos in concert but boy does their new release make me want to do so. I've grown to appreciate *Kiko* more and more over the years. This is less eccentric, more rootsy and engaged in the real world with their feet on the ground. You'll find a lot of veteran acts on my list this year. Some are consistent players in my "best of the year" roundups. Others like Los Lobos are artists I always lend an ear to and always respect but don't always make the cut. This time they do and it reminds me of how great they can be.

27. **LINDI ORTEGA** - *Faded Gloryville* Suddenly, the influence that Underwood and Lambert have had on the country music scene becomes apparent thanks to a flood of talented artists who have their own strong identity, great songwriting chops and a determination to make it on their own terms. Ortega is just the latest -- along with Musgraves -- to prove this new crop is sticking around.

28. **SHAKEY GRAVES** - *Nobody's Fool* This one-time, one-man band from Austin, Texas has worked with other artists, notably on his solid 2014 outing *And The War Came*. But he really captured me with the EP/album tossed out to the world back in February, a ten-track thing of beauty that for whatever reason was available for three days and then disappeared. It's the sort of nutty gesture independent artists can make these days but when it happens with music that takes them to another level of skill and beauty, you have to wonder - shouldn't something this good be available forever? Find it if you can.

29. **STEVE EARLE** - *Terraplane* Oh, another really, really good album from Steve Earle? What's there to say about that? It's not some crazy offshoot into new musical territory. It doesn't have a hit single. (He almost never did.) It's not tied into a movie or TV show. So it comes and goes and the

press says nothing but the people who listen know this is another work of exceptional quality to add to the shelf. He's been so good for so long that the only thing that surprises me is when this country/Americana/blues act delivers an album that doesn't make it onto my best of the year list. It happens. Just not very often.

30. **FALL OUT BOY** - *American Beauty/American Psycho* - Did Queen ever get any respect back in the day? I feel like Fall Out Boy and Panic At The Disco! and My Chemical Romance were/are some of the best acts of the past decade. Yet they seem thoroughly ignored by most, as if pop hooks and gleefully catchy choruses and thundering melodies sung by talented young guys with an army of kids singing along and all of them ready to fill a stadium are a bad thing.

31. **GARNETT MIMMS** - *Lookin' For You: The Complete Atlantic and Veep Singles 1963-1967* (compilation of the year) If you were listing my favorite albums of the year by sheer repetition, this compilation of soul gems by Garnett Mimms would be at Number One. I literally couldn't stop playing it for a while. Each song became more and more distinctive every time I heard them. It's what great pop songs do. Mimms was never a huge act, almost disappearing just as he got started. (Then the Lord called him away, like He did with Al Green. Why does God have to mess up music careers like that?) Here's what we missed. Remember greatest hits albums? One like this can capture the brilliance of an act and make a case for them like nobody's business. Anyone with a passion for soul music needs to go out and buy this one right away.

32. **PATTY GRIFFIN** - *Servant Of Love* I love a late bloomer. It gives me hope that I might actually do something worthwhile some day. Griffin hit her stride in her 40s with the gem *Children Running Through* in 2007 and she's been on a hot streak ever since. She's toured with Emmylou Harris, been covered by the Dixie Chicks and won Grammys. And *Servant Of Love* continues her run with aplomb. Let's not start taking her for granted just as she's getting going.

33. **BONES** - *Powder* To be honest, Bones had about 37 other albums, EPs and singles released in 2015. This may even be the best representation of what he's up to right now. But this act famed for releasing his music for free and refusing major label entreaties remains a darknet pleasure, a moody, spooky, beautifully mysterious artist whose music keeps pouring out. I just know Drake has been listening because I can hear it. His production remains the trump card but his rapping and lyrics aren't fall behind.

34. **DWIGHT YOAKAM** - *Second-Hand Heart* Well, hell. After years of losing interest? Feeling uninspired? I don't know, but Yoakam wasn't

feeling it and neither was I. He snapped back into shape with *3 Pears* and now this follow-up is even punchier, with the sonic snap that distinguished his best work back in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Late 1980s? Has it been that long?

35. **DANIEL ROMANO** - *If I've Only One Time Askin'* It's like Daniel Romano can hear in his head the greatness of George Jones at his absolute best. He crafts the songs and production to deliver and then does his damndest to sing the hell out of them. The tension here is between the voice in his head and the voice he has. It's a good voice but it's not George Jones and he refuses to acknowledge that, which makes it somehow kind of vulnerable and beautiful in an entirely different way. And he's a hell of a songwriter, so there's that.

36. **ADELE** - *25* Heck, it's not her fault the entire world is listening. I really can't judge this album yet. The first two singles are great and she's got the insanely catchy and fun "Send My Love (To Your New Lover)" waiting in the wings. And great pop music always improves with the sort of repetition that only radio play can offer. Oh it's a commercial behemoth and deservedly so. But is it as good as *21*? I don't think so. Is it a sign of growth? Not quite. Yet with those pipes and the intense glare of the media, maybe I'm reacting to the noise of what surrounds her rather than the music itself. And hell, I was there for "Chasing Pavements" and never expected all of this so I'm not ready to stop listening yet.

37. **THE MAVERICKS** - *Mono* The reunion of this group has been a joy and not just because it meant I got to see them live in concert again. (They're one of the best live acts, ever.) I was so happy to hear 2013's *In Time* that I couldn't quite be sure how good it was. The first time around, they'd gone wackier and wackier and frankly I loved the country-politan sound of *Music For All Occasions* and the bold eccentricity of *Trampoline*. Their "final" album seemed a retreat and now their return seemed rooted perhaps in familiar territory. But each album has boasted a handful of tunes that just kill in performance and they are solid, as if the band knows who they are now and has nothing to prove other than that they can still deliver. Comfortable in their own skin.

38. **ANDERSON EAST** - *Dellah* Speaking of Boz Scaggs and Van Morrison, here's a debut album from a kid who wants to keep the soul flame burning. Anyone listening to Leon Bridges should put that down and check this out. Occasionally stunning, always solid, this is a very appealing opener. Can't wait to see him live.

39. **DON HENLEY** - *Cass County* Yet another veteran on my list. I don't believe I've ever had the Eagles or Don Henley solo on my list for the best of the year. Mind you, the Eagles' *Greatest Hits* is an essential and I've

always loved Henley's voice. (Indeed, his solo greatest hits is also a strong buy.) But for whatever reason, his albums have always kept me at arm's length emotionally. Not here. This natural segue into pure country works like a charm for an artist who has always drawn on that musical genre for his best work. Make sure you avoid the deluxe edition. It's the shorter, punchier version that makes the best case for this music. Mind you, I think they messed up the track listing so ideally you'll figure that out and make a playlist to correct that error and get the flow right. But song for song, this is his best work and I suppose I should thank Lite FM for playing the heck out of "Take A Picture Of This" and getting me to dive back into the album.

40. **CAGE THE ELEPHANT** - *Tell Me I'm Pretty Okay*, you're pretty. And catchy and hook-filled and rocking and maybe it's just a youthful infatuation (or in this case, an infatuation with youth) but I'm willing to take a chance on you sticking around for a while.

41. **ERIC CHURCH** - *Mr. Misunderstood* A country outlaw of sorts, if touting the pleasures of marijuana still counts as an outlaw gesture these days. (I think promoting abstinence would be edgier, actually.) Yet another batch of music dropped on the world unexpectedly. The real surprise here was how fatherhood has humanized and slowed down Church and deepened his songwriting. Good stuff.

42. **BOB DYLAN** - *Shadows In The Night* At the most, bad music usually just elicits a shrug. Bold music, unexpected music, wild left turns? Well, those elicit anger and confusion and sadness and derision. When Dylan released this album of standards, a tribute to Frank Sinatra recorded not with strings or a jazz combo but his touring band, the general reaction was WTF? (In contrast, his recent album of Christmas music got a shrug.) Dylan's been here before. Anger and confusion and villagers armed with pitchforks and torches greeted Dylan when he went electric, when he went country, when he found Jesus (and then lost Him again). Heck, the most lambasted album of his career - *Self Portrait* - came from recording sessions that have now produced music that has become widely acknowledged as pretty fricking amazing. Those sessions, not to mention his cover albums from the 1990s and his constant references lyrically and musically to classic folk tunes and poems of the past as well as the wide musical palette he's employed drawing in everything from Stephen Foster to swamp music have made one thing abundantly clear: Bob Dylan draws upon popular music. All of it. Of course the natural comparison is Willie Nelson's *Stardust*, an album greeted I believe with confusion and a little indifference until it steamrolled into a remarkable commercial hit and became recognized as a classic. Nelson has always wandered far and wide into different genres (reggae and blues and so on) while Dylan has

taken up various strands and woven them into his own unique and distinctive style. So here he is, one of the most influential singers of all time, tackling some standards. At first listen, I was intrigued if not floored. At second listen, I thought, let me take a break from this for a while. I'm just not sure what I think. Obviously, this wasn't one of his tossed off albums; he was singing with care and attention to the lyrics. But was it good? Well, it's definitely good; but how good I can't quite say yet. But over the course of months of returning to it when the mood struck, *Shadows In The Night* has deepened for me, become stronger, sturdier, more moving. Why this rush to judgement? Sometimes, it takes a while to appreciate an album's strengths (and its flaws, for that matter). People make up their minds about an artist and just close their ears. David Bowie's death was mourned to a remarkable degree. But the truth is that until 2013's *The Next Day*, the world had spent 30 years pretty much dismissing everything he recorded from Tin Machine to solo work. The albums were listened to once, if at all, and then tossed aside. (I include myself here. A good friend pointed out for years that the people who ignored Bowie's post *Let's Dance* music hadn't really *listened* to Bowie's post *Let's Dance* music, not really. Don't great artists deserve more careful attention? A year from now, I'll bet *Shadows In The Night* climbs up higher on this list. Five years from now? Ten? We'll see. He's recorded his share of clunkers over the years. How could any real artist not do so? But it's never smart to bet against Dylan. Like *Carrie & Lowell*, this has a fragile beauty, with Dylan allowing his voice to waver and sigh, sounding as vulnerable as ever, whether tackling "Some Enchanted Evening" or pondering "What'll I Do?" It may be his most emotional, open-hearted album. Why this? Why now? What can I say? All I know is that I keep coming back to it, puzzling it over or just letting its quiet tenderness wash over me. "Who can explain it? Who can tell you why?" he declaims at one point. "Fools give you reasons. Wise men never try."

FADE OUT

Looking back at my list, I'm surprised by how many veterans popped up on it. I certainly didn't hear the year that way, at least not until I actually looked at what I listened to and rated highly. It's a good year for some old friends! And yet, I've never listened to more new albums than ever before. Maybe that's why I assumed this list would be dominated by newer acts. Instead, I discovered Los Lobos and the like made a good showing in 2015.

Why's this? I think it's the tidal wave of music available. It used to be only critics who got swamped by a flood of CDs (or cassettes or LPs or whatever). But even Robert Christgau never had quite as many actual albums in his office as any casual fan can access on Pandora right now.

And when the options grow and grow, it's no shocker to realize you gravitate to familiar territory, checking out the latest from familiar acts. I miss the gatekeepers: it's fun to stumble upon an album that's barely been released anywhere in the world like Humble Orange Band.

But finding that meant I also plowed through a LOT of albums that never would have made it on my radar in the past since they would have had to make it to a label and then the publicist would have to decide to forward it to me. That system had its minuses, but stemming the rising waters was one of the positives.

This seems to extend to genres as well: I've lost track of a lot of world music and jazz and other, less-beaten paths I've known and loved in the past. Plus, I'm getting older and find myself increasingly drawn to what for lack of a better word I'll call Americana, all those strains of music that draw upon folk and blues and the like.

Or maybe it's the hard times I see all around me, from the homeless people I pass sleeping on the sidewalk every cold night or the small business owners who welcome me haunting their diners late at night just so they have someone to talk to and people walking by know they're still open. In hard times, sometimes the truth rings louder strummed on a guitar.

In 2016, I'll try to be more discerning AND more broad-minded in terms of style. Now tell me what albums I foolishly left off! I can't wait to check them out.

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