

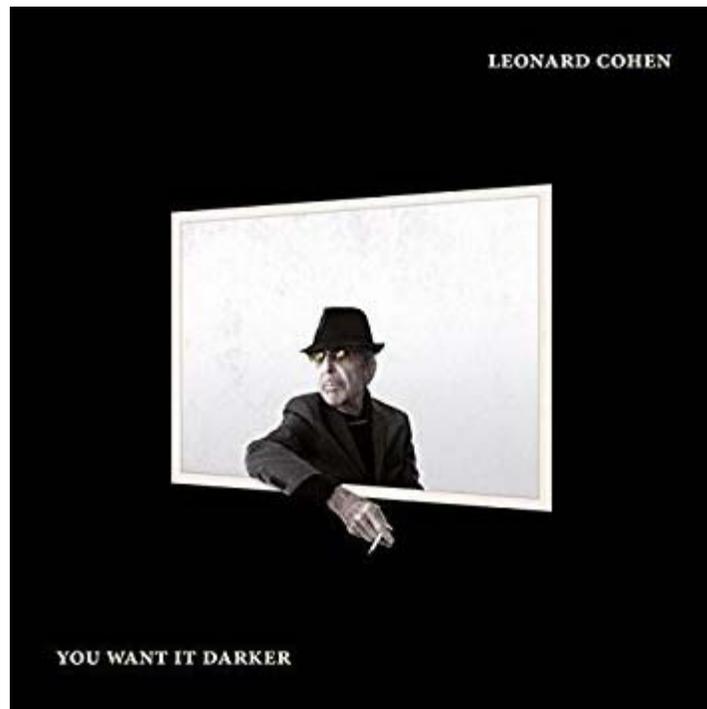


Michael Giltz, ContributorBookFilter creator

# Grammy Preview: The Actual Best Albums Of 2016

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Hey, I know exactly why people do best of the year lists: to force themselves to knuckle down and watch that final movie they missed, read that acclaimed nonfiction book, check out that cool new TV show (See you in a few months *Legion*. Promise!) and so on. Every year I do the same with music, with the build-up to the Grammys as my deadline. And unlike the Grammys, I don't stick to a bizarre eligibility period (in this year, albums are eligible if they were released between October 1, 2015 and September 30, 2016). I get it, they have to draw the line somewhere. But does it have to be right before the big fall season when the biggest albums of the year come out? Just move the Grammys towards summer a little (and have one award year cover 14 months of music). It's as if the Oscars stopped including movies released in November and December and we had to wait until February of 2018 to watch *La La Land* sweep everything in its path...by which time no one would care anymore. It won't be easy, but fix it. And now, my list of the best albums of the year. Like any list, I hope it's quirky and distinctive and reflects my own obsessions. You won't say, "He's exactly right! That album IS the 23rd best album of the year!" But if it's an album in a genre you love or by an artist you've been meaning to check out, I hope seeing it here will inspire you to give it a listen. More music is available more readily than ever before. Maybe this can guide you towards some great stuff.

## THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2016

1-10

**DAVID BOWIE** -- *Blackstar + Lazarus EP*

**LEONARD COHEN** -- *You Want It Darker*

**MAXWELL** -- *blackSUMMERnights*

**CHANCE THE RAPPER** -- *Coloring Book*

**JOSHUA REDMAN AND BRAD MEHLDAU** -- *Nearness*

**TEDDY THOMPSON AND KELLY JONES** -- *Little Windows*

**SOLANGE** -- *A Seat At The Table*

**JAMES HUNTER** -- *Hold On!*

**STURGILL SIMPSON** -- *A Sailor's Guide To Earth*

**TRIO** -- *The Complete Collection*

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**KANYE WEST** -- *The Life Of Pablo*

**THE MONKEES** -- *Good Times!*

**REGINA SPEKTOR** -- *Remember Us To Life*

**KENNY BARRON** -- *Book Of Intuition*

**RADIOHEAD** -- *A Moon Shaped Pool*

**MIRANDA LAMBERT** -- *The Weight Of These Wings*

**GREEN DAY** -- *Revolution Radio*

**BOB DYLAN** -- *Fallen Angels*

**PANIC! AT THE DISCO** -- *Death Of A Bachelor*

**MAHALIA JACKSON** -- *Moving On Up A Little Higher*

21-30

**MARGO PRICE** -- *Midwest Farmer's Daughter*

**DORI FREEMAN** -- *Dori Freeman*

**A TRIBE CALLED QUEST -- *We've Got It From Here...Thank You For Your Service***

**PET SHOP BOYS -- *Super***

**MUDCRUTCH -- *Mudcrutch 2***

**NICHOLAS KRGOVICH -- *The Hills***

**JANE SIBERRY -- *Ulysses' Purse***

**CAR SEAT HEADREST -- *Teens Of Denial***

**DUNCAN SHEIK -- *Legerdemain/American Psycho Original London Cast Recording***

**JACK WHITE -- *Acoustic Recordings: 1998-2016***

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**JOE LOVANO -- *Classic! Live At Newport***

**DWIGHT YOAKUM -- *Swimming Pools, Movie Stars***

**KING CREOSOTE AND MICHAEL JOHNSTON -- *When I Was A Thief***

**LUCKY PETERSON -- *Long Nights***

**PJ HARVEY -- *The Hope Six Demolition Project***

**COMMON -- *Black America Again***

**CALYPSO ROSE -- *Far From Home***

**ORIGINAL CAST ALBUM -- *Dear Evan Hansen***

**BRIAN ENO -- *The Ship***

**PSYCHIC TEMPLE -- *Plays Music For Airports***

**LED ZEPPELIN -- *The BBC Sessions***

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**THE STRUTS -- *Everybody Wants Some***

**case/lang/viers -- *case/lang/viers***

**CONOR OBERST -- *Ruminations***

**HOUSTON PEARSON AND RON CARTER -- *Chemistry***

**CHARLIE PUTH -- *Nine Track Mind***

**BRENNEN LEIGH -- *Sings Lefty Frizzell***

**THE LUMINEERS -- *Cleopatra***

**LAURA MVULA -- *The Dreaming Room***

**ESPERANZA SPALDING -- *Emily's D-evolution***

**CORINNE BAILEY RAE -- *The Heart Speaks***

Early favorite of 2018:

**Kasey Chamber — *Dragonfly***

## **THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2016 — THE LINER NOTES**

1-10

1. (tie) **DAVID BOWIE -- *Blackstar + Lazarus EP* / **LEONARD COHEN -- *You Want It Darker*** — Two great artists deliver gorgeous, haunting swan songs on their way out the door. Bowie has come to mean more and more to me in recent years as I began to fully appreciate just how damn good he's been. Leonard Cohen has been a touchstone for me ever since the Jennifer Warnes' tribute album *Famous Blue Raincoat* stopped me dead in my tracks. Is my appreciation colored by their deaths? Of course! I'm only human. But I do know this: Bowie's 2014 album was both a critical and commercial triumph after many years when I wasn't paying attention to him. And Cohen enjoyed a late career resurgence, delivering several albums in a row that were good to very good indeed. So these triumphs didn't come out of nowhere. Bowie's embrace of a jazz band as his backing group showed him pushing boundaries right up to the end. Cohen continued to tend the small, romantic patch of land he's been tending for more than 50 years.**

**3. MAXWELL -- *blackSUMMERnights*** — Maxwell is taking his own sweet time. While the timeless yet of-the-moment *BLACKsummernights* wowed everyone, this followup came and went without much ado. I haven't a clue as to why. Comparisons to Stevie Wonder and Van Morrison at their best are fully justified. Like them, he's an artist whose albums create entire worlds that you submerge into and then slowly wake up from, reluctantly shaking off the dreams he's weaved around you. I can't wait for *blacksummerNIGHTS* and any other adventures in capitalization he wants to take me on.

**4. CHANCE THE RAPPER -- *Coloring Book*** — The best album of the year that you can't buy. Yes, in a true sign of the times (or should that be sign o' the times?), Chance The Rapper's album can't be bought for love or money — it's available via streaming only because a compact disc is so 1990s and what's the point of a digital download anyway? It's also proof that what matters is not the medium. On cassette or CD or 78, this is a transcendent album, demonstrating even more than Kanye's gorgeous "Ultralight Beam" how gospel is reinvigorating hip-hop in ways not seen in years. And not in a "bring out the choir" trope, but in a lyrical yearning and desire for faith and redemption, in a musical mining of chords and progressions that trigger uplift (not all triggers are bad) and in an embrace of the positive that doesn't ignore or downplay the hardships of life. Yes, it's hip-hop but as rap grows to subsume seemingly every musical style there is (right up to bro-country), that label seems increasingly meaningless. Sure, Chance talks more than he sings, but then so does Leonard Cohen and so did Johnny Cash and so did Rex Harrison for Pete's sake. Sturgill Simpson doth protest too much that he's a country singer while Chance can rest easy in the category of hip-hop because the label of "country" is a brand while hip-hop means pretty much whatever you want these days. To me, there's good music and there's bad music. This is good music.

**5. JOSHUA REDMAN AND BRAD MEHLDAU -- *Nearness*** — Kamasi Washington’s debut album *The Epic* proved jazz could still demand attention from the world at large if it was great enough. I’d drifted away from the genre, a combination of lack of access and no sense of excitement. Maybe I’ve been missing out all along because this year I was seeking it out and yes, seek and you shall find. I had no idea Joshua Redman and Brad Mehldau toured as a duo in 2011. Listening to this live recording, I’m even more mystified as to why it took five years for them to put out an album. It collects three covers and three originals and the entire collection is electric. I don’t know why, but given it’s just a piano and a saxophone, for some reason I imagined a close, intimate dance. (Maybe because it’s called *Nearness* after the ballad “The Nearness Of You”?) Hell no, these two are out there — no net and they could care less, flying off into space and trusting the other to catch them when they fall beautifully back to earth. It’s probing and fearless and thrilling stuff.

**6. TEDDY THOMPSON AND KELLY JONES -- *Little Windows*** — Sure, I've got a thing for Teddy Thompson. He's a disarmingly gifted artist who keeps improving with every album, so what's not to like? This duets project with Kelly Jones is so unassuming, so concise and pleasurable that it slips by without any fuss, much like Thompson himself. But something happened to Teddy. On his third album — *Up Front And Down Low* — he tackled some country classics and that unlocked his beautiful voice in a way we'd never heard before. It gained a swagger, a confidence. That confidence has carried over to his producing skills, ones he tentatively embraced and then backed off and then embraced again. He's at the top of his game here, alongside his mom Linda as executive producer. He's brought out the best in her on Linda's solo albums and she's returned the favor here. The detail is impeccable, with little production touches that seem offhand at first but on repeated listen feel inevitable and just right. This is an absolute gem, with most of the songs co-written by Jones, Thompson and Bill DeMain. Their voices intertwine with the genetic rightness of the Everly Brothers and if closing track "You Took My Future" isn't a future country #1, I don't know my charts. I'm certain it's a stone cold classic, just like the rest of this album.

**7. SOLANGE -- *A Seat At The Table*** — This is a righteous, frank and furious declaration of independence — musically, politically, lyrically, beautifully. It features a combination of confrontational frankness and classic soul that feels almost unique. The humor helps, as do the gorgeous melodies and collaborations with an array of artists that feel less like "also starring" pop-ins from the latest and greatest and more like a genuine meeting of the minds for a singular purpose. *What's Going On* circa Angela Davis is as good a

reference point as I can come up with. I have absolutely and positively paid little to no attention to Solange's career before this. Her sister sucks up a lot of oxygen, of course, and taking eight years between albums can cause the fickle mind of a critic to wander. But now I'm headed right back to 2008's *Sol-Angel and the Hadley St. Dreams* and 2003's *Solo Star*. If this album is any indication, they'll be timeless.

**8. JAMES HUNTER -- *Hold On!*** — Blue-eyed soul from the UK, which is another way of saying James Hunter is a white boy with a gift for urban soul. Think horns, think swinging London but don't think retro or kitsch. Like the late, great Sharon Jones (he's on the Daptone label now), James Hunter delivers classic numbers that could have easily blasted out of a convertible 60 years ago. But they're not exercises in nostalgia; it's just that love and heartbreak never go out of style. Think slick rather than gritty and if you can see him in concert, by all means jump. You'll be a fan for life.

**9. STURGILL SIMPSON -- *A Sailor's Guide To Earth*** — Sturgill Simpson prefaced this follow-up to his marvelous *Metamodern Sounds In Country And Western* by saying loudly and clearly, “I am a country artist and I record country music.” Huh? What’s with the defensiveness? Then I heard the album and realized he was delivering a preemptive strike, laying down a marker that he’s a country artist before anyone could say, “Gosh, I like it but this sure doesn’t sound a lot like country music....” Like Chance The Rapper’s *Coloring Book*, Simpson’s *A Sailor’s Guide To Life* makes genres and categories and labels meaningless. Not because it encompasses so many styles while making them distinctively his own (though it does indeed), but because it’s so unique and engaging that you don’t really worry about what to call it. This song cycle dedicated to his son and offering advice on how to live a life (and just as often, how not to live a life) does indeed rock out and get soulful and boast string arrangements and some of the boldest production of the year. Trippy and sweet.

**10. TRIO -- *The Complete Collection*** — Linda Ronstadt, Dolly Parton and Emmylou Harris formed the superest of super groups when they recorded all too briefly as Trio. Their 1987 debut is sublime and beautiful, so well-crafted, so thrillingly sung, so delicate and precise in its presentation that it was an immediate classic. They should have toured and recorded again and again. Instead, we got a second, very different album some 12 years later. The first album seemed like a curio you found buried in your grandma’s attic, maybe a dusty pile of 78s you put on the Victrola and then sat back astonished by. The second album leapt into the future of country music; it was still rock-solid in the song selections and astonishing in the singing but clearly they had no interest in repeating themselves. And that was it. More songs were recorded sporadically and finally popped up on various solo albums yet they never reconvened properly. (For no good reason, I blame the very busy Dolly Parton, but who can stay mad at Dolly Parton for more than a minute?) You can also enjoy a brilliant duets album featuring Ronstand and Harris. But given Ronstadt’s vocal issues, the Trio project is done. This trim, inexpensive boxed set contains the two albums, those various singles and odds and ends. For three such important artists, you can’t say it’s the peak of their careers. But it’s certainly just as important and just as good as anything they’ve done on their own and that’s saying a heck of a lot.

11-20

**11. KANYE WEST -- *The Life Of Pablo*** — No standup artist, no comedy, no sketch show on late night TV made me laugh more than the line, “I love you like Kanye loves Kanye.” Lyrically, he’s often let me down but musically he’s almost always doing something cutting and fresh. And twice, he’s put it all together for me. First on the “yeah I’m a freak” whig out *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and now again on *The Life Of Pablo*, though god only knows what version I’ve been listening to. It’s messy, sprawling, funny, self-obsessed, inspiring (God again!) and then the poor bastard has a meltdown. Here’s hoping he can get off the treadmill and take care of himself and be healthy. Let the self-destructive tendencies stay in the studio, not real life.

**12. THE MONKEES -- *Good Times!*** — One night in college, some drunken guys on my floor thought it was hilarious to burst into one room after another loudly demanding if the people they’d woken had a Monkees greatest hits album. They needed the Monkees! (This was during a dead zone before or after one of the periodic revivals of interest in the Prefab Four.) Well, they hammered on my dorm room door and to almost no one’s astonishment I actually DID have a Monkees greatest hits album (hey, my room was filled with CDs) and of course they played it loud and “Last Train To Clarksville” and “I’m A Believer” and the rest of their enduring hits came pouring out. For a long time, I thought a greatest hits set was all one needed for

the Monkees. Actually, I thought that right up to this album, which contains a clutch of new songs written specifically for the guys, alongside some well-chosen covers. Their first album in 20 years, it's a treat from start to finish, even if their vocals show their age a little and the late Davy Jones is present in spirit only. Surely this immediately became the greatest studio album they ever made. Well my savvier rock music friends quickly put me to rights, asking if I'd ever listened to this or that album of theirs. Had anyone, I thought? Weren't they a singles band? Apparently not. Streaming won't quite do them justice. (You're almost always better off with a well-curated, well-paced greatest hits set rather than an endless supply of songs in no particular order.) By all means, get one of the best hits sets (not a 2 album set). And if you're already a fan, snap this up. I started smiling on the infectious opening title track and haven't stopped since.

**13. REGINA SPEKTOR** -- *Remember Us To Life* — I'm a stalwart fan of Spektor. Ever since her breakthrough fourth album *Begin To Hope*, I've found her to be a consistent pleasure — vocally audacious, fun, and when you least expect it, moving. Each of her albums since have made my best of the year list. If 2012's *What We Saw From The Cheap Seats* felt a little like running in place, a sign perhaps she might be faltering just a tad, here Spektor is back in charge. Another strong addition to an impressive body of work and now I'm confident she's just getting started.

**14. KENNY BARRON** -- *Book Of Intuition* — So I plunged back into jazz, determined not to miss out on what's happening. And this trio recording is precisely why: after a decade together, pianist Barron has finally delivered a studio recording of his current touring trio. Seven originals and three choice covers and to me Barron's compositions are bracingly good and performed with brio. For a minute, I wondered if these were standards I just hadn't heard yet; that's how melodically strong and invigorating they are. Good stuff.

**15. RADIOHEAD** -- *A Moon Shaped Pool* — Well, thank God. They've finally relaxed and accepted that it's ok to deliver one gorgeous melody after another and you don't have to sabotage your own gifts — however brilliantly — to be a serious artist. Now let's not start taking this for granted. Honestly, I don't really mind if they get relentlessly quirky again, not since I cracked the code of *Kid A*. But an album so old-fashioned in its fundamentals and yet so modern in its concerns keeps me hopeful for rock and roll.

**16. MIRANDA LAMBERT** -- *The Weight Of These Wings* — It's a double album, so that's a pretty big statement. And yeah, it plays like she saw this as an old-fashioned double LP, complete with four sides of songs grouped together with starts and finishes to each section. Or maybe that's just me. But I do know there's no heavy-handed concept, no straining for importance. Lambert just delivers one good song and then another and then another and none of them are earth-shattering, maybe. But when you've performed a dozen and are just getting a full head of steam, that's a pretty impressive statement all by itself. I guess for the moment the younger upstarts are cooler and edgier in some undefinable way. But Lambert is lapping the field and they don't even know it. (And someone bring back *Nashville Star* and host Nancy O'Dell; I miss that show a hell of a lot more than I miss *American Idol*.)

**17. GREEN DAY -- *Revolution Radio*** — Another big sigh of relief. I actually really liked their second concept album (*21st Century Breakdown*), even if it did seem a little too out-Who-ing the Who for this scrappy power punk pop band. While their triple play of down and dirty albums (*Uno! Dos! Tré!*) was better in concept than execution, at least their hearts were moving in the right direction. Still, Billie Joe Armstrong's excellent outside projects (the awesome Beatle-esque songs he did for a Shakespearean musical and his Every Brothers tribute with Norah Jones) might have meant the end of the road for the band. Happily, Armstrong is healthy again and they're blasting away with the no-nonsense, pissed-off, catchy as hell new album *Revolution Radio*. I always thought they were a cuter Ramones but now damned if they haven't morphed into something as close to the Clash as we've got right now. Keep it up!

**18. BOB DYLAN -- *Fallen Angels*** — Oh how the world scoffed when Dylan released his tribute to Sinatra, a standards album called *Shadows In The Night*. It was met with shrugs and laughter by the general public and polite but quiet approval by critics. But I kept listening and listening and every time I did, the experience of the album seemed to deepen for me. Dylan has been expanding his palette for decades — you couldn't limit him to political tunes or even folk singing and certainly not just rock. He's added in blues and Tin Pan Alley and jazzy undertones and gospel and pretty much everything from Stephen Foster to Alicia Keys (if only in name-checking). That continues with these albums of big band standards. It's all music to Dylan and rightly so. A good song is a good song and a great singer (and few are as great as Dylan) knows what to do with them. I imagined Dylan was getting better on this second album, just as Linda Ronstadt improved during her collaboration with arranger Nelson Riddle. While the first standards album grew on me, *Fallen Angels* devastated me right from the start. I've loved it from day one and the only reason it's not higher on my list is because I simply haven't played it that often for fear of dimming its pleasures. (Some movies can be watched a thousand times; other great movies should be revisited only carefully over the decades, so you don't exhaust their power. The same can be true of any art form.) Turns out these songs were pretty much recorded the same time as the first album so Dylan isn't getting better at this. As always, I'm just catching up with him. In 2017 he's releasing a three album collection of even more standards and I'm chomping at the bit.

**19. PANIC! AT THE DISCO -- *Death Of A Bachelor*** — I really, really don't understand why Brendan Urie isn't praised to high heaven by more people or why their songs aren't streamed a gazillion times. His voice is amazing, his songwriting chops are impressive and his albums are produced with verve and stadium-filling confidence a la Queen and Tears For Fears. It kills me that I haven't seen them in concert yet and I don't say that about many young pop acts. Sure, strum an acoustic guitar and I'll fantasize about seeing you in a small club. But these guys deserve fireworks and giant screens and screaming fans galore. I love 'em.

**20. MAHALIA JACKSON -- *Moving On Up A Little Higher*** — Wow. I think the Mahalia Jackson I've seen in concert clips or heard on Christmas albums and compilations geared towards a wide audience has been the polite, respectful, buttoned up Mahalia Jackson for white folk. Not that I doubt the woman was a model of decorum in every situation; Bessie Smith she ain't. But this compilation of live performances is I imagine Jackson performing for predominantly black audiences, no white folks in sight (or maybe some in the

back, but that's alright as long as they behave themselves and don't make a fuss). Mahalia is cutting loose here in a way that's thrilling. I know she's delivering some applause lines she's delivered a thousand times before ("You make me feel like really singing!" she says at one point, inevitably prompting another wave of cheers). Who cares? When you're this good, you can coast in your stage patter. She never coasts in her singing. The sound quality for these previously unreleased tracks is excellent. I never cease to be amazed at the music by legends like this that can still be unearthed after all these years. A feast.

21-30

**21. MARGO PRICE -- *Midwest Farmer's Daughter*** — I wasn't thrilled with her voice at first. (Cruelly, I kept thinking how Maria McKee could sing the hell out of these songs.) And the title track opener felt a little too Loretta Lynn redux, though for all I know the thing is completely autobiographical. But with some nudging from my friend Michael Tierney (who will tell you I'm an idiot because this is the best album of the year) and its repeated presence on best of the year lists, I kept listening and kept liking it more and more. Very strong songwriting and clearly one of the leaders of the next wave of country talent.

**22. DORI FREEMAN -- *Dori Freeman*** — I'm not done with Teddy Thompson yet. Along with growing confidence and terrific duets album, in his spare time he produced this Cinderella story. Freeman just reached out to him as a fan and said, "Here's my music." He listened (!) and loved it and produced her debut, a treat in the singer-songwriter, folkie vein. It's right up there with Price and Maren Morris and all the other talented artists in what seems like a class of newcomers ready to stake their claim to the big time. Artistically, that is, though you never know. I feel sorry for Thompson; the more this story gets around the more women that are gonna deluge him with their demos. Heck, if he can discover another act this good, he can always fall back on a career in A&R.

**23. A TRIBE CALLED QUEST -- *We've Got It From Here...Thank You For Your Service*** — Like Bowie and Cohen, this is a swan song for the classic lineup of one of the great acts of the past 25 years. It's like they never dropped a beat, picking up right where they left off. The only thing that keeps this from being absolutely perfect to me is the anecdote they shared about reaching to Willie Nelson's people for a guest vocal and being turned down. I didn't think Willie ever turned down ANY request for a vocal but the doofus in his camp that let this one slip away really blew it.

**24. PET SHOP BOYS -- *Super*** — I can't keep saying how surprised I am by the continuing relevance of Pet Shop Boys, a band that sounded like a one-hit wonder with "West End Girls" but soon blossomed into an extraordinary act with a depth of feeling and insight I wouldn't have predicted in a thousand years. Here they are at it again, blessedly without any attempt to stay "current" since the best way to do so is to be faithful to the classic sound they've achieved over the years. Funny, poppy, wise. Super.

**25. MUDCRUTCH -- *Mudcrutch 2*** — I've been binge-listening to Tom Petty for the past few months, since weirdly he's an artist that I've never paid enough attention to, though every time I do I'm rewarded. Yet even as a very casual fan, I'm a bit gobsmacked that after decades of success with his Heartbreakers (and

solo) that Petty could resurrect his FIRST band and deliver not one, but now two distinctively different, excellent albums. It's absolutely different from his Heartbreakers and yet true to the rock and roll he's espoused all these years. If I were a member of the Heartbreakers it might send a chill up my spine to know how easily I might have missed out. If I were a member of Mudcrutch, I'd feel the sweetest vindication. Pretty damn great and a remarkable alternate history come to life for one of rock's legends.

**26. NICHOLAS KRGOVICH** -- *The Hills* — File this next to the Blue Nile and Steely Dan. It's late night music recorded with the shades drawn and a bottle of whiskey by your side. Confessional, smart-ass, savvy, cynical and with enough pop verve to keep you up till dawn. It floored me and I immediately ran out and got *On Sunset*, his 2014 album. That's terrific as well. Not a single review on Amazon in the US and only one in the UK. Though it's an import, *The Hills* is drenched in Los Angeles atmosphere. I've no idea who he is or where he comes from but the more I listen the more I like. Don't hesitate.

**27. JANE SIBERRY** -- *Ulysses' Purse* — Like Kanye West, Canadian artist Jane Siberry seems to be messing with our idea of the album. She keeps fussing with a collection of songs, recording and recording them again in various configurations. Part of the issue is going from truly independent to getting a proper release of sorts, an absurd situation if it's not by choice for such a talent. I can't sort through them all or parse out the differences. All I know is that this particular compilation of recent songs is pretty damn terrific.

**28. CAR SEAT HEADREST** -- *Teens Of Denial* — Rock and roll by some bratty kid named Will Toledo who doesn't even realize how darn good he is and just keep churning it out. Last year was *Teens Of Style* and this year it's *Teens Of Denial* and I guess next year it'll be *Teens To Revile* or *Teens Of Wile* or *Teens Reconcile*. Bring it on cause this is increasingly confident, lyrically engaging rock and roll that's passionately youthful (because he's young) and as serious as only a young artist can be when the fate of the world depends on getting it right and capturing that moment of angst or uncertainty or triumph.

**29. DUNCAN SHEIK** -- *Legerdemain/American Psycho Original London Cast Recording* — It's been a treat to be with Duncan Sheik from the start, profiling him for Entertainment Weekly for his debut album. Sheik boasted he could do so much more than write a hit pop song; I thought, "Hey, don't dismiss a good pop song! It's not that easy to do." Only to watch him deliver increasingly ambitious and far more accomplished albums worthy of comparison to Nick Drake and then leap to Broadway with the brilliant *Spring Awakening*. While his latest musical on Broadway — *American Psycho* — was not successful, it's most intriguing element was the score that echoed Eighties pop music. And Sheik's latest solo album is a strong addition to his catalog of adult chamber pop, a world of hard-earned wisdom and sneakily catchy melodies.

**30. JACK WHITE** -- *Acoustic Recordings: 1998-2016* — This is pretty jaw-dropping. I'm crazy about Jack White in all his iterations, from rock projects to the late lamented White Stripes to his solo stuff to his DIY record label and more. If the guy started a distillery, you know the whiskey would be handcrafted and great. His range just musically is impressive. And then here he comes with a sprawling anthology that

delivers some well-known tracks, demos and alternative takes that as the title says show an acoustic side to what he's done. It's as if Jack White said "I did that, but you know I could have done this!" And this is positively terrific. Not better exactly though certainly not just a curiosity. It's a sign of a great collection of songs that they can be this flexible. And it's a sign of a singular talent.

31-40

**31. JOE LOVANO** -- *Classic! Live At Newport* — Well, hell, that's a pretty damn boastful album title. And damned if they don't deliver.

**32. DWIGHT YOAKUM** -- *Swimming Pools, Movie Stars* — Someone once said a critic is a person who loves what you do, but not *everything* you do. I've always taken that to heart. If you're crazy about an artist, it's only natural to want to support them or to grade on a curve if their most recent work isn't quite as revelatory as their earlier stuff. But when you imagine Rolling Stone magazine would rather poke out its eye than NOT include a Rolling Stone album in their best of the year list (and that's how it seemed for decades after such goodwill should have been exhausted), well what good is Rolling Stone magazine to you? So I'm a loyal fan but loyalty means I listen and listen again to an album by an artist I've loved in the past, always ready to give it a second chance if something is not clicking right away. Which is a long-winded way of saying Dwight Yoakum is officially back. After 1995's *Gone*, I had to pass over his next seven albums, unable to put them on my best of the year list. Well something changed because with 2012's *3 Pears*, 2015's *Second Hand Heart* and this year's cheekily titled *Swimming Pools, Movie Stars*, Yoakum is three for three in a row. One of the great aching, country voices of them all; a mean guitarist; a terrific songwriter and the tightest jeans in the business — he's the total package and it's great to see him flowering creatively once again.

**33. KING CREOSOTE AND MICHAEL JOHNSTON** -- *When I Was A Thief* — The Scottish artist King Creosote is a genuine DIY artist, turning out a seemingly endless series of albums and collaborations. As of yet, his 2016 solo album *Astronaut Meets Appleman* hasn't moved beyond the "interesting" category. But this collaboration with Michael Johnston definitely hits the dusky, contemplative sweet spot that is King Creosote at his best. I don't know if anything will match the haunting perfection of *Diamond Mine* (w Jon Hopkins) but I going to keep listening.

**34. LUCKY PETERSON** -- *Long Nights* — a bluesman from Buffalo, New York. Maybe it's a cliché but yeah, the older he gets seemingly the better he gets. A sterling collection of electric blues thanks to strong songs and excellent performances all around. Now is definitely the time to see him in concert.

**35. PJ HARVEY** -- *The Hope Six Demolition Project* — I lost track of PJ Harvey for a while but she's won me back with this strong collection of overtly political songs about gentrification taking place in DC. Somehow, it works; I think her passionate anger gave Harvey a focus outside of herself that proved a great benefit to her songwriting and singing. It's not so inward and tightly wound as she's been in recent years.

**36. COMMON -- *Black America Again*** — One of the smartest and committed artists around, Common doesn't have time for any nonsense. So this wide-ranging critique of America and the lack of standing for people of color is probing and pointed and hopeful if only because Common can dissect the myriad problems so easily. Which makes this sound like homework when in fact it's inspiring to know you can see the world so clearly and yet still rise above it, at least in your art.

**37. CALYPSO ROSE -- *Far From Home*** — It's been a decade since the brilliant artist Manu Chao has released a studio album. Is he running for political office? Planning a new world order? Social issues seem to have consumed him, which is a plus for society but definitely a minus for music. Thank goodness he is still inspired to work with others. Chao does his usual magic with this album of (I believe mostly) classics newly recorded by the legendary Calypso Rose. Snagging the title of "Calypso Queen" five years in a row, Rose had mostly retired from performing and lived in NYC. Somehow she and Chao hooked up and the result is this infectious treat. "Woman Smarter" is my new anthem. Now if only he'd be inspired to get back in the studio himself.

**38. ORIGINAL CAST ALBUM -- *Dear Evan Hansen*** — The new Broadway musical *Dear Evan Hansen* is a big hit and basking in acclaim. I'm one of the few naysayers in that I don't absolutely love it. I have problems with the set and the book but I most definitely do NOT have a problem with the score. It's by the guys behind the songs in *La La Land* (and believe it or not, I'm one of the folks not wowed by that one either). They definitely saved their best songs for Broadway and god knows Ben Platt can sing circles around Ryan Gosling. (Which Gosling would be the first to admit.) It seems like a career year for Benj Pasek and Justin Paul to most — their film is going to win Best Picture and their musical will most certainly be nominated for a Tony. But I believe their best work lies ahead and the proof can be found right here.

**39. BRIAN ENO -- *The Ship*/PSYCHIC TEMPLE -- *Plays Music For Airports*** — Brian Eno would be a towering figure in music just for his behind the scenes work as a producer, engineer and innovator. In a way, his work with U2 and David Bowie and Roxy Music and Talking Heads (to name a few) has almost overshadowed his remarkable body of work as a recording artist. I may be slightly overpraising his latest album, which has a typically eccentric backstory in how it was created. Yet, you can't go too wrong betting on Eno's music to improve with age. And what really blew me away this year was the group Psychic Temple doing an entirely new recording of one of Eno's landmark works, *Plays Music For Airports*. Frankly, Eno's music seemed specific and unique to those recordings. I never considered them compositions in the same way one might of a symphony. I never really imagined anyone recording even a single track off one of Eno's ambient albums. But here they are covering the entire piece and doing a brilliant job of it. It's completely changed my attitude towards Eno's work and how it might speak to others in the decades to come.

**40. LED ZEPPELIN -- *The BBC Sessions*** -- Can there still be pleasures hidden away in the archives of a band as well documented as Led Zeppelin? Yes.

**41. THE STRUTS** -- *Everybody Wants Some* — Wonderfully engaging rock n roll in a Stones, Queen, glam rock, slutty LA scenesters sort of way. Dirty and nasty and catchy and I really want to see them in concert. Always a good sign.

**42. case/lang/viers** -- *case/lang/viers* — Sort of a distaff Crosby, Stills & Nash with the 60s vibe that implies and the genuine coming together of three distinctive talents. I haven't listened to this nearly enough yet. (Hey, it happens.) But I know it's good and fans of any of them will surely snap it up. But WTF, lang said she was thinking of retiring before reaching out to the other two about forming a group? That's the most frightening thing I've heard in ages — lang should be singing at her own funeral 40 years from now, not thinking of retiring!

**43. CONOR OBERST** -- *Ruminations* — He's still at it; I still like it. Like Neil Young, the guy follows his own muse and he's usually right.

**44. HOUSTON PEARSON AND RON CARTER** -- *Chemistry* — Another duets album that caught my ear in this year of “damnit, don't ignore jazz!” Two pros doing it with casual flair.

**45. CHARLIE PUTH** -- *Nine Track Mind* — I subscribed to Charlie Puth's YouTube channel loooong before he started making a name for himself. So yeah, I've had absurdly high hopes for this guy, Bruno Mars-like hopes for this guy. And he's mostly delivering. This debut is chock full of some seriously good pop songs. He hasn't put it all together yet. It feels more like a random collection of songs than an album. But he could put it all together and a solid collection of pop songs is nothing to sneeze at, especially when it includes a gem like “Marvin Gaye” and a few others almost as good. But dude, let the eyebrow grow back in!

**46. BRENNEN LEIGH** -- *Sings Lefty Frizzell* — A gender-spinning treat but this is not a stunt. Leigh sings classic Frizzell tunes with commitment and wit. The playful twist some of his songs get when sung by a woman is just an added bonus. Mostly this is simply a heartfelt tribute that does both of them proud.

**47. THE LUMINEERS** -- *Cleopatra* — Well, I didn't expect to like it. I mean we're all sick of “Hey Ho,” right? But after insisting they would go off in some entirely new direction, The Lumineers came to their senses and avoided repeating themselves and avoided desperately trying NOT to repeat themselves, which is often worse. Yeah, it's exactly what you'd expect if you heard their first album. But it has integrity and good songs and their nonstop touring has paid off with stronger musicianship all around.

**48.- 50. LAURA MVULA** -- *The Dreaming Room/* **ESPERANZA SPALDING** -- *Emily's D-evolution/* **CORINNE BAILEY RAE** -- *The Heart Speaks* — I have the crazy feeling these three very talented artists got together, dropped acid and then went off on their own to record these experimental, crazy, beautifully nutty albums. They're mind-expanding in the best possible way. I've ranked albums by all three as among

the best of the year. And when these new albums came out one by one, I put them on and reared back in astonishment and thought, “What the hell was that?” And then played them again. I haven’t wrapped my head around what they’re doing here, but they’re challenging themselves and me and I’m not about to dismiss it just because I may not be quite ready for it the first time around. I’m going to live with these albums and eagerly anticipate their next ones and know that on a return visit I might be wondering what I was hesitating for because they’ve been revealed to me as far better than I first appreciated. And if these worthy albums by these terrific artists remain flawed but beguiling, I’ll know that genuine talent sometimes falls short only because they’re leaping across a chasm to somewhere new and wonderful that only they can see.

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