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MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THE ULTIMATE GRAMMY PREVIEW: THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2024

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Every year, I put out my best of the year list right before the Grammys hand out their awards, including Album of the Year. Why? It gives me an extra few weeks to listen to music, gather my thoughts...and catch up on the albums I missed on *other* people's lists that all came out by December 31. Sneaky!

I check out the British mags to see what reissues they're touting or what new act they're hyping to kingdom come. I read U.S. reviews and keep an eye on the charts. But I also rely on the marvelous music blog, *Burning Wood*, where my friend Sal offers up a wide-ranging, entertaining take on classic music, new releases, songs and albums of the day, deep dives on artists he loves and every once in a while an excerpt from a terrific musical memoir he's penning about growing up in NYC. He's even polite about my sometimes quixotic taste. Check it out!

So, yes I listen to a lot of music. This year, I listened to *more* classic albums than ever before. I have about five ongoing projects: listening to every album *The Penguin Guide to Jazz* ever named to its All Time List, a dive into Nat "King" Cole and Mel Tormé catalogs and numerous other acts, a wonderful side trip into the world of ambient music after stumbling onto an excellent best-of list and pretty much anything else that caught my fancy. In all, I listened to more than 800 (!) different albums I'd never heard before, not to mention replaying stuff I know and love. That is a record for me; streaming may have its downsides, but like access to your local library, it's pretty awesome that most of the great music ever made is just a click away.

Hopefully, you'll scan this list and discover an act you enjoy put out new music and you didn't even realize it. Even better, maybe you'll read about an act, become intrigued and give them a listen. If you discover some new music you love, my work here has been worth it! And let me



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FAVORITE LINKS

- Americablog
- Five O'Clock Lightning baseball blog
- Deep Pop -- Lori Lakin's Blog
- The Back Page -- Jason Page on ESPN Radio
- Cine-Blog -- George Robinson's Blog
- Documents On Art & Cinema - Daryl Chin's Blog
- Brucie G's Wondrous Blog Of Adventure and Mystery -- Bruce Greenspan's Blog

BLOG ARCHIVE

- ▼ 2025 (38)
 - ▶ March (7)
 - ▶ February (25)
 - ▼ January (6)

know what albums I *should* have included but didn't. My Best of the Year lists aren't written in stone. I'll remove albums that fall out of favor and—more often—add in an album that grows on me or escaped my notice.

If you want to know more, here's more:

The Best Albums of the Year—1924 to the Present!

(My favorite album from each year for the past century (!), followed by my lists of the best albums from each and every year.)

My Music Library From A-Z, including Christmas Music, Soundtracks, Cast Albums and Compilations!

(Album reviews arranged by artist, from ABBA to ZZ Top)

Below, I list all my favorite albums and then offer a breakdown of what I found special for the Top 10. Give 'em a spin! So here we go. The best albums of 2024 are...

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2024

- THE SMILE -- *Wall of Eyes / Cutouts*
- THE LEMON TWIGS -- *A Dream Is All We Know*
- LINDA THOMPSON -- *Proxy Music*
- MANU CHAO -- *Viva Tu*
- GREEN DAY -- *Saviors*
- LADY BLACKBIRD -- *Slang Spirituals*
- NICK CAVE -- *Wild God*
- BILLIE EILISH -- *Hit Me Hard and Hit Me Soft*
- ELLIOTT BROOD -- *Town and Country*
- BEYONCÉ -- *Cowboy Carter*

- GRUPO FRONTERA -- *Jugando a Que No Pasa Nada*
- THE CURE -- *Songs Of A Lost World*
- CHER -- *Forever*
- RICHARD HAWLEY -- *In This City They Call You Love*
- BRIAN ENO -- *Soft Edges ep / Small World (w Bloom)*
- WILLOW -- *Empathogen*
- RICHARD THOMPSON -- *Ship To Shore*
- ESLABAN ARMADO -- *Amor Perdido*
- PAUL KELLY -- *Fever Longing Still*
- CHUCK PROPHET -- *Wake The Dead*

- KACEY MUSGRAVES -- *Deeper Well*
- JONTAVIUS WILLIS -- *West Georgia Blues*
- BRIGHT EYES -- *Five Dice, All Threes*
- MARCUS KING -- *Mood Swings*
- GEPE -- *Undesastre*
- STURGILL SIMPSON -- *Passage du Desir*
- M. WARD -- *For Beginners: The Best of M. Ward*
- KALI MALONE -- *All Life Long*

THE ULTIMATE GRAMMY
PREVIEW: THE BEST
ALBUMS OF 2024

WORLDWIDE BOX OFFICE
FOR WEEK ENDING
JANUARY 26, 2025

THE 250 BEST ALBUMS OF
THE 21ST CENTURY...SO
FAR

WORLDWIDE BOX OFFICE
FOR WEEK ENDING
JANUARY 19, 2025

WORLDWIDE BOX OFFICE
FOR WEEK ENDING
JANUARY 12, 2025

WORLDWIDE BOX OFFICE
FOR WEEK ENDING
JANUARY 5, 2025

- 2024 (37)
- 2023 (8)
- 2022 (6)
- 2021 (8)
- 2020 (7)
- 2019 (93)
- 2018 (34)
- 2017 (6)
- 2016 (2)
- 2015 (11)
- 2014 (2)
- 2013 (5)
- 2012 (17)
- 2011 (15)
- 2010 (10)
- 2009 (43)
- 2008 (86)
- 2007 (781)
- 2006 (2405)
- 2005 (5)

JACK WHITE -- *No Name*

THE HENCHMEN -- *Hench-Forth*

FANTASTIC CAT -- *Now That's What I Call Fantastic Cat*

JAY WHEELER -- *Música Buena Para Días Malos*

BUZZARD BUZZARD BUZZARD -- *Skinwalker*

SHOVEL DANCE COLLECTIVE -- *The Shovel Dance*

THE AVETT BROTHERS -- *The Avett Brothers*

LIAM GALLAGHER AND JOHN SQUIRE -- *Liam Gallagher and John Squire*

PESO PLUMA -- *Éxodo*

WILLIE NELSON -- *The Border*

PET SHOP BOYS -- *Nonetheless*

X -- *Smoke & Fiction*

THE BLACK CROWES -- *Happiness Bastards*

THE JOHN SALLY RIDE -- *Melomaniacs*

LAURA MARLING -- *Patterns in Repeat*

ROSIE TUCKER -- *Utopia Now!*

IVAN CORNEJO -- *Mirada*

BETA RADIO -- *Waiting For The End To Come*

REISSUE: LONE JUSTICE -- *Viva Lone Justice* (reissue?)

REISSUE: VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Uptown Top Ranking: Trojan Ska & Reggae Chartbusters*

REISSUE: MCCOY TYNER & JOE HENDERSON -- *Forces of Nature: Live at Slugs*

REISSUE: NUSRAT FATEH ALI KHAN -- *Chain of Light*

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2024 -- THE EXTENDED CUT

THE SMILE -- *Wall of Eyes / Cutouts*

Not one but two great albums this year? Radiohead is dead. Long live Radiohead. I mean, The Smile! Actually, they're not quite Radiohead by another name. But this trio clearly gives Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood the freedom to create without the burden of *being* Radiohead and that's freed them up to deliver some great music. Their debut album *A Light For Attracting Attention* (2022) is also excellent. And boy, does recording under a different name help! I was barely *aware* of these albums for months while a new Radiohead album would have been inescapable. However, it's hardly a country album or folk music side project. So for heaven's sake, enjoy.

THE LEMON TWIGS -- *A Dream Is All We Know*

Okay, the lads are really coming into their own. This duo of 70s obsessed rock n rollers are delivering the power pop/AOR/Todd Rundgren-ish/rock n roll of our dreams. Eccentric enough to not just be aping their elders, The Lemon Twigs are the real deal. They soak up their influences and then craft their own original, brilliant version. But really, they'd be awesome openers for Rundgren. From a Beach Boys rip-off so good Brian W. should sue them to "Church Bells" or the opener "My Golden Years," it's one killer after enough. Just drop the needle anywhere and enjoy. The more you play it, the more you love it and can't quite believe they're not dominating the charts. Hat tip to the music blog Burning Wood for touting the band, deservedly so.

LINDA THOMPSON -- *Proxy Music*

I was wary of Linda Thompson's latest album. The medical condition that plagued her voice—one of the great instruments in popular music—seems to have precluded any more singing whatsoever. So Thompson wrote a clutch of songs and invited friends and family to perform them. So it's not really a Linda Thompson album (she doesn't sing on it at all), but it's not quite a tribute album either. What the hell is it? Well, it has an amusing title, a great "taking the piss" cover and to my astonishment, it magically feels very much like a new Linda Thompson album. Yes, other people sing on it, people like Rufus Wainwright and Dori Freeman and Eliza Carthy. But Thompson's songwriting is so strong, her worldview so well captured in both the songs themselves and the performances by her friends that it's just...a Linda Thompson album, through and through. It's really quite remarkable and wonderful, an act of communal creation that is fairly unique, I'd say. It's strong from start to finish, but John Grant's performance on "John Grant" is even more head-spinning than the album as a whole, with Linda getting deep inside Grant himself with her lyrics...and then asking him to sing it. And that sneaky Teddy Thompson is no fool. With family and friends as gifted as Kami Thompson and The Rails and the Wainwrights, he cowrites four songs, produces and saves the hilarious and wonderful closing track "Those Damn Roches" for himself.

MANU CHAO -- *Viva Tu*

Where *have* you been, Manu Chao? It's been 17 years since one of the most exciting artists of the 21st century put out an album. I wouldn't have minded if this politically minded artist became mayor of Paris or the leader of France. Indeed, I'm not sure what he's been up to but I'm sure it was meaningful and joyous, because that's what his music has always been like. *Viva Tu* doesn't miss a beat, continuing Chao's exploration of human connection and what really matters in songs that feel ready to be sung by others in a way his earlier, more production-focused albums perhaps have not. A man and a guitar is the vibe here. Plus, Willie Nelson! Chao peaked with 2001's *Proxima Estación: Esperanza*, which to use a term some dislike is world music of the best sort. Rock n roll? Absolutely. He's passionate, socially conscious and catchy as hell, a Bob Marley who sings in Spanish, French, English, Italian, Arabic, etc etc etc. See what I mean? The return of an old friend

who has great stories to tell and remains just as committed to change.
Thank goodness.

GREEN DAY -- *Saviors*

Green Day stumbled for a moment after the extraordinary critical and commercial peak of *American Idiot*. Their follow-up *21st Century Breakdown* was terrific, actually, but they didn't want to be The Who 2.0 for the rest of their career. The triple threat of *Uno! Dos! Tres!*—three albums all at once—proved a rare stumble for this consistently good to great act. But they've been in top form ever since. Like clockwork, they've delivered an excellent album every four years. *Revolution Radio*, *Father of All Motherfuckers* and now *Saviors* are smart, politically incendiary and catchy as hell. Turns out they were The Clash more than The Who, after all. And how have I never seen them live?

LADY BLACKBIRD -- *Slang Spirituals*

The first track on Lady Blackbird's second album—"Let Not (Your Heart Be Troubled)"—begins and you *sit up*. The huge choir, the anthemic melody, the surging and spiritual lyrics. She's not messing around. By the time of the delicate, lovely fourth track "Man on a Boat," you're sitting back, relaxed because you know that excellent opener wasn't a fluke. This is the real deal. I really enjoyed her debut but came to it late. From an intriguing talent, Lady Blackbird has grown into a major talent, a (it's impossible to avoid the comparison) Nina Simone-like magnetic presence. She's vulnerable, wise and wonderful with a collection of romantic tunes, sometimes old school, sometimes expansive and slippery (like "When The Game Is Played On You") and always in command. LaBelle? Jill Scott? Now, Lady Blackbird.

She's another act I discovered thanks to the excellent music blog Burning Wood. Check it out!

NICK CAVE -- *Wild God*

Bruce Springsteen has a bit he does in concert, preaching to the crowd about the glories of rock 'n' roll. But Nick Cave *really* preaches, offering a show that's half tearful embrace, half ecstatic reaching towards a higher plane and half raucous revival meeting. His new album is *Wild God* and this G-d is scary and awe-inspiring in its indifference to us. This G-d is Nature unbounded, a G-d that neither cruelly delights in our misery nor shares the burden, anymore than the sea sympathizes with the ship that founders. The sea just...is. But we can sympathize and share the burden and joys of life, a communal coming together Cave offers in concert, on his marvelous email newsletter The Red Hand Files and on this album that begins at a peak and then builds from there. Ecstatic stuff.

BILLIE EILISH -- *Hit Me Hard and Hit Me Soft*

I had my money on Lorde (and I know, it's not a competition). But it's the mumbly, soft-spoken Billie Eilish who keeps delivering the goods. Three albums and she hasn't missed a beat yet. Plus, she makes me blush when Eilish sings she finds someone so appealing that "I could eat that girl for lunch." Heavens! Now, that's rock n roll to me: honest, sexy, edgy and catchy as hell.

ELLIOTT BROOD -- *Town and Country*

I've been a fan of this Canadian rock band since I stumbled on them in a bar in Toronto way, way, way back when. They were self-distributing their music, brandishing a banjo long before Mumford & Sons and writing some great songs. Who are these guys, I wondered, a la Butch and Sundance. Throughout the years, they've been signed to record labels, been nominated and won Junos (Canada's top music award), toured and achieved the dream of making music their life. Recent albums moved me with their journeyman embrace of the hard work of doing all this and long past expecting the cover of Rolling Stone or streaming hits a la Adele. Now, out of nowhere, they released two short albums/eps of eight tracks each. One called *Town* and the other called—no points for guessing—*Country*. Then they combined both albums, trimmed one track from each and called the result *Town and Country*. It's the best album of their career. Mature, still raucous, wise and heartening. Well into their careers, they swung for the fences artistically and delivered. This is Americana, or perhaps Canadiana, from the road song opener "Rose City" (they're great at open-road songs) to the infectious "Bluebird Wine" and the gorgeous closer "French Exit." Think Gram Parsons or Jason Isbell. Think Elliott Brood.

BEYONCÉ -- *Cowboy Carter*

Some critics love to be contrary. "Oh, everyone loves Taylor Swift? Not me, boyo! Over-rated!!!" Etc. That's not my style. If I don't like someone, well, I don't. However, there are acts I can sort of see the appeal but simply don't vibe with. Not my thing, but I don't want to pick a fight. Taylor Swift and Beyoncé are two of the dominant artists of the past 25 years...and by and large they do little for me. I enjoyed the video album *Lemonade* more than the audio album alone. Swift's *Red* was my favorite of hers and even that didn't make my best of the year list. Given the serious critical acclaim and massive popularity, I think, gee, maybe it's me. I listen to the albums, keep an open ear, enjoy certain songs and wonder if I'll ever get on the bandwagon. Turns out it was a chuckwagon. I'm delighted I can really get behind Beyoncé's new country album: it's catchy, wide-ranging and bold. Beyoncé is too cool to do the usual genuflecting others might do, like obvious pairings with established country superstars. I mean, she has Willie Nelson and Dolly Parton on the album to voice approval, but they're just on the album to give their blessings, which is pretty damn nifty. She's not asking permission. She's not trying to win them over. This Houston, Texas native says uh-uh, this is my music too, baby, so step aside. Actually, a lot of it is more country adjacent than pure country (whatever that means in an era of "bro country" and country-rap), but who

cares? While friends of mine can knowledgeably dissect the album's many nods to history and its complex undercurrents, I just enjoy songs that don't have the usual freight (train) of grand statements Beyonce's often trafficked in on previous works. It's a hoedown! For a change, I can enjoy the party.

GRUPO FRONTERA -- *Jugando a Que No Pasa Nada*

This Texas band is only two albums in. They're still finding their voice here, branching out from the first (excellent) album's more traditional vibe to embrace pop and r&b and other strands, without losing what made their debut special. They could go anywhere after this and I'm excited. Note to self: see them in concert, pronto.

THE CURE -- *Songs Of A Lost World*

I don't *think* I'm a big fan of The Cure. I've never seen them in concert. I've rarely thought about them. Back in the day, I rather dutifully bought their 1986 compilation *Staring At The Sea aka Standing on a Beach* because I thought I *ought* to, due to the rave reviews...and then discovered it really was pretty great. But in that pre-streaming era where listening to more albums meant a serious investment of \$15 or so per CD, that was as far as it went. But darned if their 2008 album *4:13 Dream* didn't wow me and now 16 years later hearing Robert Smith's ever-complaining vocals on *Songs of a Lost World* is like hearing from an old (kvetchy) friend. Maybe I really *am* a big fan of The Cure and I just didn't know it. When I get the chance, in 2025 I'll start from the beginning with them.

CHER -- *Forever*

I mean, damn. This greatest hits compilation comes in two packages. *Forever* contains 21 tracks, *Forever Fan* contains 40 hits and they still omit quite a few Top 40 records. The single disc set concentrates on mostly the "recent" hits from the past few decades, including her 2023 gem of a Christmas song. The two disc set also includes key Sonny & Cher tracks, making it pretty damn definitive. It is an *impressive* string of hits covering almost 60 (!) years with songs written by Sonny Bono ("The Beat Goes On") to just Bono ("I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." I'm not surprised by the enduring appeal of "Believe" and "If I Could Turn Back Time" and "Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves" and on and on. But I was surprised by the strength of the (many) songs I didn't know, even on the deluxe version. Irresistible.

RICHARD HAWLEY -- *In This City They Call You Love*

I am late to the game in appreciating this British musician, who's enjoyed success with the band Longpigs, touring with Pulp, collaborating with others and a string of solo albums this century. He's a classic rock n roller in the singer-songwriter vein, leaning on strings, ballads and some old school rave-

ups to deliver this wistful gem. For the adults, though kids who enjoy a world-weary vein should check it out too.

BRIAN ENO -- *Soft Edges ep / Small World* (w Bloom)

I dove into the deep end of ambient music this year, checking out Hiroshi Yoshimura's *Green*, Tangerine Dream's *Phaedra*, Japanese compilations and other terrific stuff. But mostly, I listened to Brian Eno. I love Eno, one of the most important figures in popular music. But he's so prolific, I realized I had a lot of catching up to do. So I listened to Eno and more Eno and still more Eno. And most of it was great, including his new ambient works *Soft Edges* and *Small World*, which is credited to Eno x Bloom. And if you're interested in checking out ambient, you should definitely start with the album that gave the genre its name: *Ambient 1: Music For Airports*. In all, I listened to 16 albums by Eno. I gave eleven of them 3 1/2 or a perfect four stars.

WILLOW -- *Empathogen*

I'm only human. The daughter of Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith is putting out an album? I'm both open-minded and cross-armed, meaning I'll give it a listen but I'm not gonna grade on a curve. It didn't take long to realize Willow is the real deal, debuting with an album that proved she's not just legit, but an artist.

RICHARD THOMPSON -- *Ship To Shore*

Hey, I'm not just tough on famous offspring. Richard Thompson is one of my favorite artists of all time, delivering great music with Fairport Convention, then-wife Linda and for 40+ years as a solo artist, collaborator and film composer. But he's so consistent and I like him so much, that I am pretty tough on him. I expect so much and I'm so wary of liking him by default that each new album must earn my trust. His most recent gem *13 Rivers* took over a year to convince me it wasn't just *another* good Richard Thompson album, but a great one. *Ship to Shore*? One play and I found myself falling hard. Brilliant guitar work, caustic and clever lyrics, classic themes of dashed dreams with a side of despair? It's all here, shot through with humor, insight and melodies that lodge into your brain and take up residence. Consistently lauded, he's probably under-appreciated, nonetheless.

ESLABAN ARMADO -- *Amor Perdido*

This fantastic California band delivers "regional Mexican music," a dumb industry term I'm gonna re-dub "Mexicana." The music is fresh, wonderfully arranged and embraces elements of traditional Mexican folk, but this ain't your parents' norteño music. Catchy, sexy, danceable (indeed, try *not* to sway along), I caught onto them when their 2022 album *Nostalgia* debuted on Billboard's Top 10 and clued me into this whole genre. This may be their final album for the indie label DEL, which discovered and signed them. I'm not

sure if I'm more sad about them moving on or excited about where a major label might take them next.

PAUL KELLY -- *Fever Longing Still*

CHUCK PROPHET -- *Wake The Dead*

Two veterans deliver the goods. Paul Kelly is an Australian institution. I caught on to his greatness with the 2019 greatest hits set *Songs From The South: 1985-2019*, a 43 track compilation that will blow you away with a never-ending stream of one great track after another. It's like suddenly stumbling across the best of John Hiatt or John Prine and wondering how the heck you missed him all these years. His latest album *Fever Longing Still* maintains that standard.

Chuck Prophet is a journeyman rocker who gets better and better. After decades with the band Green on Red and solo work, he's really come into his own in the past 10 or 15 years. *Wake The Dead* finds him collaborating with cumbia band ¿Qiensave? and it works a treat. Prophet has a wry sensibility, a way with words and a voice that confides with confidence, knowing you'll hear and understand. Life ain't easy, he knows, but it's easier with music like this.

KACEY MUSGRAVES -- *Deeper Well*

I've enjoyed Kacey Musgraves since her debut *Same Trailer, Different Park* in 2013. So it was a little disconcerting when this country act turned pop on *Golden Hour*, the whole world embraced it commercially and she won the Grammy for Album of the Year. I was delighted for her and yet...didn't really love it. Happily, this followup also has a pop vibe, especially the hazy sound of the 1970s and this time I dig it. Don't ask me to explain why or how, but I do.

JONTAVIUS WILLIS -- *West Georgia Blues*

Electric blues, delivered with relish. What more do you need to know?

BRIGHT EYES -- *Five Dice, All Threes*

Bright eyed and bushy-tailed no longer, but with a great clutch of songs I can only describe as Bright Eyes-ian. More and more, I hear Conor Oberst's influence on younger acts. Anyone with a tremulous voice and tumbling lyrics owes him a debt.

MARCUS KING -- *Mood Swings*

In a mellow mood, surely. Blues rocker Marcus King offers an intimate, late night, soul-baring collection of songs. Producer Rick Rubin continues to bring out the best (and the unexpected) in people.

GEPE -- *Undesastre*

The Chilean artist Gepe draws on everything from indigenous folk music to Brian Wilson on his latest album. Gepe is new to me and I've got about a dozen albums to catch on apparently, so I've no idea how this fits into his discography. Pop? Sure, yet it also scratches the itch of hearing music from around the world. The guest appearances on more than half the tracks feel organic; they're serving the songs, not just showing off. And I'm all for undisastering the world, if still possible. Smooth and engaging.

STURGILL SIMPSON -- *Passage du Desir*

Sure, Sturgill Simpson has gone all Garth Brooks on us. It's usually not a good sign when an artist suddenly decides they need to create under an alter ego, a different persona. So when Simpson "retired" his name and said his new album was gonna be by "Johnny Blue Sky," well, I got worried. But hey, if that's what he needs to think, then what do I care? The music style doesn't sound so far afield from the genre-embracing work on *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music*, but if calling himself Johnny Blue Sky frees him up the way two guys from Radiohead record as The Smile, I should relax. Especially when the result is one of his best.

M. WARD -- *For Beginners: The Best of M. Ward*

I love his voice, his distinctive guitar work, his sometimes lo-fi vibe, his work with Zoëy Deschanel on *She & Him*...I mean, geez, why don't I marry him? 2023's *Supernatural Thing* was his strongest solo since *Hold Time* in 2009. And now here comes an old school greatest hits set, which gathers a bunch of tracks from various albums over the years. Arranged for maximum impact (not chronologically), nonetheless it starts with "Chinese Translation," the infectious, unstoppable, make-you-an-instant-fan song from *Post-War* and then ranges far and wide, including his great cover of David Bowie's "Let's Dance" to a new version of Godley & Creme's "Cry." Great title. Great album.

KALI MALONE -- *All Life Long*

Classical composer Kali Malone specializes in marvelous works with a nod towards minimalism. (Is there any composer that actually *embraces* the tag of minimalism? I don't think so.) The albums I've listened to by her range from really great to really, really great. Her 2019 work *The Sacrificial Code* is the breakout album, featuring an epic composition for pipe organ. But 2022's *Living Torch* features trombone, bass clarinet and drones while 2023's *Does Spring Hide Its Joy* features her husband guitarist Stephen

O'Malley of Sunn))) on guitar, Lucy Railton on cello and Malone on "tuned sine wave oscillators" (whatever that is). The new album? It's described as having "organ drone recordings." All I know is, if I play any of them I'm riveted. Malone is a major talent.

JACK WHITE -- *No Name*

THE HENTCHMEN -- *Hentch-Forth*

Jack White brings it, from a stomping solo album to a guest appearance on the awesome new record by The Hentchmen. This is the plug-in-your-electric-guitar-and-turn-it-up music White can deliver with seeming ease. So why the heck doesn't he do this *all* the time? :)

FANTASTIC CAT -- *Now That's What I Call Fantastic Cat*

A super group! Well, not to be a jerk, but most people haven't heard of the members of Fantastic Cat. That's their fault, since each member enjoys productive solo careers. But sometimes a super group really is super and that's certainly the case here. I somehow missed their 2022 debut, the cheekily named *The Very Best of Fantastic Cat*. It's a winner but this new album *Now That's What I Call Fantastic Cat* (a play on a long-running UK series of hits compilations) is even better. Monsters of Folk? The Traveling Wilburys? Yep, add Fantastic Cat to the list of super groups that really delivers. Catchy as hell rock n roll, a la, oh I don't know, Marshall Crenshaw or Warren Zevon? Best line: "If the universe is expanding/ Why's my rent still going up?" Spin this now if you live for AM radio. See? I played the first track and now I can't stop. I'll be back in 39 minutes.

JAY WHEELER -- *Música Buena Para Días Malos*

Bad Bunny isn't the only game in town, when it comes to Puerto Rican acts. Jay Wheeler went viral after posting a song about breaking up with his girlfriend. He was just 16 years old, but after years of avoiding singing in public because he was bullied and mocked in school, that instant success gave him the courage to pursue it as a career. Seven or so albums later, he's disciplined (the album has 13 songs and runs 40 minutes), self-sufficient (only two guest appearances) and perhaps it's my imagination but I hear a welcome vulnerability and openness in his singing and rapping. That's mirrored in the lyrics. Besides, we could all use good music for bad times.

BUZZARD BUZZARD BUZZARD -- *Skinwalker*

Is bat-shit crazy rock n roll a genre? The rocking rock band from Cardiff, Wales (dear God, I almost called them British; forgive me, lads!) have gotten harder and stronger since their excellent

debut *Backhand Deals*. Meanwhile, they've been studying their mythology for this new work is a concept album about skinwalkers that starts off nutty and then goes really berzerk. But along the way, they've got stomping, thumping radio-ready (if hard rock radio was still a thing) monsters that hit me hard, when I'm not befuddled trying to follow the storyline. Can't wait to see them in concert.

SHOVEL DANCE COLLECTIVE -- *The Shovel Dance*

By far the best collection of traditional folk music delivered by a nine-piece collective that I've heard all year. Easily. From the organ (?) intro to the massed vocals on some of the foundation-shaking highlights, this is a group effort in every sense of the word, even when a song might feature only one voice or a few instruments. (Everyone involved seems capable of playing about ten, it seems.) Doom-laden narratives like "The Merry Golden Tree" (about a ship at sea) demonstrate the irony of how despair can prove healing when acknowledged and sung about as a community.

THE AVETT BROTHERS -- *The Avett Brothers*

It's a career year for The Avett Brothers, who saw the musical *Swept Away* featuring their music and starring longtime fan and booster John Gallagher Jr. of *Spring Awakening* fame debut on Broadway. And their latest album is the best since their peak of *I And Love and You* in 2009. Americana, folk rock, call it what you will. This is earnest, thoughtful music.

LIAM GALLAGHER AND JOHN SQUIRE -- *Liam Gallagher and John Squire*

The lead singer of Oasis and the guitarist John Squire walk into a bar...and deliver exactly the meat and potatoes rock and roll you'd want from Liam and John. So familiar on first listen it's gonna take me a while to let this one sink in and see where it lands. But fans of either shouldn't hesitate.

PESO PLUMA -- *Éxodo*

He's 25 and no featherweight, so it's no surprise Hassan Emilio Kabande Laija aka Peso Pluma delivers a double album right after his excellent *Genesis*. Side One (not that there is such a thing) features the Peso Pluma I like best, a lyricist and singer/rapper who plumbs the riches of Mexican music. Guest stars abound, but they don't overwhelm what he's doing. Side Two interests me less; it's Peso Pluma as a somewhat tough (but not that tough) modern rapper. The guest stars seem to take over. It's still good, but Side One would have been a sterling work on its own while Side Two makes me worried Pluma is learning the wrong lessons. Hardly a surprise: the super catchy massive

hit "Bellakeo" with Brazilian star Anitta appears on Side Two and powered the album's success. It's terrific, as is "Teka" with DJ Snake, the closer with a clever sample of cop sirens that sort of freaked me out while I was walking up Second Avenue in NYC and then made me laugh. Peso Pluma is conquering the charts; I just hope he becomes more focused on conquering greatness.

WILLIE NELSON -- *The Border*

The last time I named a Willie Nelson album to my best of the year list, it was 2009 and his marvelous songbook album titled *American Classic*, a worthy sequel to the classic bestseller *Stardust*. And the year before that, he topped my list with the live album *Two Men With The Blues* alongside Wynton Marsalis. Since then, Willie has released approximately 472 more albums and a lot of them—many of them, indeed most of them—are solid. Even at 91 he's putting out one to two albums a year and it's a beautiful thing. You can listen to and enjoy most of them. Nothing about *The Border* is astonishingly different; it's just got a slightly stronger selection of songs and Willie's world-weary vocals are just that more spot-on. So no, this isn't a comeback or a victory lap for a beloved artist. He's never gone away and we've never forgotten how great he truly is. I look forward to hearing the two or three albums he delivers in 2025 and if you haven't listened to Willie in a while, by all means put on *The Border* and marvel anew at a Mount Rushmore-worthy legend of popular music.

PET SHOP BOYS -- *Nonetheless*

X -- *Smoke & Fiction*

Speaking of veterans adding to their already impressive catalogs, the Pet Shop Boys and X both do precisely that. Nothing shocking here, either, except the Pet Shop Boys have enjoyed a far more distinguished career than I ever would have guessed after what I assumed was their "one hit wonder" success of "West End Girls." (He's not even singing! He's *talking*!) And the punk rock band X announced their next album would be their last and damned if *Smoke & Fiction* isn't one of their all-time best. Quentin Tarantino, take notes.

THE BLACK CROWES -- *Happiness Bastards*

Sometimes you love an album and push it on everyone around you. Sometimes a friend loves an album and pushes it on you. Their enthusiasm, their constant attempts to play it when you're driving around, their turning up the volume when a song appears on the radio, it all builds and builds and maybe sometimes you reject it (that's their thing, you say to yourself). But if you've any sense and your friend has good taste, hearing the music over and over coupled with your friend's joy makes you a fan too. I might have become a fan anyway someday but friends definitely turned me onto Hüsker Dü and Rush and Jackson Browne and Fleetwood Mac and The Replacements and a

million other bands, like The Black Crowes. Thanks, friends! Mind you, none of my friends are besotted with Prefab Sprout like I am, but you can't have everything.

THE JOHN SALLY RIDE -- *Melomaniacs*

I've been a fan of power pop entity The John Sally Ride for years. But 2023's *The Other Women* was too meta for my taste. (It delivered answer songs or alternate takes on famous tunes featuring a woman's name; instead of "Walk Away Renee" you got "Run Away Renee" and instead of "Sweet Caroline" you got "Mean Caroline." However, I will admit I knew a Jolene and she definitely hated Dolly Parton's "Jolene.") So when I heard the new album *Melomaniacs* was built around an obsession with music and featured songs extolling stuff like the joy of hearing an album that's come out on compact disc for the first time or an overwhelming record collection or which Kinks album to start with, I was nonplussed. I could identify with it all, but really? After a jaundiced first listen, I was slowly won over. And really, *Melomaniacs* could be my life story...anticipating an act's new album coming out, grabbing a magnifying glass to look at the lyrics included in a cassette release, having a friend build specialty floor to ceiling cases to house my CDs, wondering where to start with a band like The Kinks back when that meant spending \$15 on a physical copy? I've done it all. Power pop fans and melomaniacs need apply.

LAURA MARLING -- *Patterns in Repeat*

ROSIE TUCKER -- *Utopia Now!*

Parenthood changes you, I hear. Acclaimed folkie Laura Marling starts her new album with adults chatting quietly while a baby coos. It's a contemplative, accomplished, self-assured work that knows exactly what it wants to do: capture this moment, pay attention to it, savor it. That she does. From the strings to the gorgeous background vocals to the finger-picking, this is Joni Mitchell territory. Eight albums into her career, Marling wins without trying.

In contrast, Rosie Tucker is angrily examining the world on her wryly amusing, dream pop album. She gets jealous when people she knows appears on TV, whereas Laura Marling probably doesn't have the time to watch TV. Tucker pushes back against the attention economy and the capitalist treadmill and all the things she's supposed to do to build her brand. Her lyrics are funny and pointed, like "I hope no one had to piss in a bottle so I could get the thing I ordered on the internet." Her music is catchy as hell and her politics are on point, so consider this your marching music for the next protest. People are still gonna protest, right?

IVAN CORNEJO -- *Mirada*

Apparently the genres reggaeton and "regional Mexican music" (a label only a label or music critic would ever use) are vying for supremacy in the hearts of

listeners. Reggaeton got so heavily into tired sexist lyrics that when the acoustic vibe of Mexicana (hmm, that's better) burst onto the scene and the acts weren't calling women "bitches," it worked. Music with a sense of pride in folk origins but ready to embrace rock n roll too? Works for me. Ivan Cornejo is a California artist who started things off right: he learned to play "La Bamba" by Ritchie Valens via YouTube tutorials. Cornejo has a hypnotic burr in his languid vocals and now he's making his major label debut with his third album *Mirada*. Just give a listen and you'll fall hard.

BETA RADIO -- *Waiting For The End To Come*

I like to end strongly, just to make sure no one thinks this list is ranked. After the first album or two I put at the top, they're just *all* great. Mostly the order comes about naturally by making sure I mix up genres and styles and languages and men and women and so on to keep everyone reading. And while you're scanning the list for favorites or genres you like, you might just stumble across acts and albums you *weren't* looking for. Besides, how could I resist ending with an album titled *Waiting For The End To Come*?

Every time I post my favorite albums of the year list, I ask people: what albums did I miss? One year, the answer came from someone I didn't even know: check out Beta Radio. What a treat. Rock n roll. Americana. "Real" music. Call it what you will, this is indeed the real stuff you need: passionate, lyrical, gorgeous, intimate, moving, with a soupçon of more religious imagery this time around, which makes me think of The Avett Brothers. I can namecheck Bon Iver or Jackson Browne or Midlake but like every act worth its salt, this duo is all its own. Music for adults, which means everyone from the cooler high school students to NPR listeners to rockers who need some Sunday morning wake-up music.

REISSUE: LONE JUSTICE -- *Viva Lone Justice* (reissue?)

REISSUE: VARIOUS ARTISTS -- *Uptown Top Ranking: Trojan Ska & Reggae Chartbusters*

REISSUE: MCCOY TYNER & JOE HENDERSON -- *Forces of Nature: Live at Slugs*

REISSUE: NUSRAT FATEH ALI KHAN -- *Chain of Light*

Oh dear g-d, what a loss it was when record label shenanigans tore the heart out of Lone Justice. *Viva Lone Justice* proves what an exciting, thrilling band they were. I'm not completely desolate because we've enjoyed the marvelous solo career of Maria McKee. But we were definitely cheated when Lone Justice died too soon.

I don't know much of anything about reggae. And the iconic record label Trojan has so many different, overlapping compilations you could do a master's thesis on the intricacies of them. All I know is I spun *Uptown Top Ranking: Trojan Ska & Reggae Chartbusters*. And then I spun it again and again.

The jazz greats pianist McCoy Tyner and saxophonist Joe Henderson had a ferocious meeting of the minds on this double album live set from 1966 that for some reason remained unreleased until now. Inexplicable.

For a period, everyone not in the know was suddenly wowed by the great qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. He sings religious music, specifically Sufi devotional music, long discursive songs with jazz-like vocal improvisation that circle higher and higher until reaching the heavens. He sang with Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam! His music was everywhere! Pop stars stole his melodies for Bollywood musicals! But NFAK has literally dozens and dozens (perhaps hundreds and hundreds) of recordings and it can be overwhelming. Most people, like me, heard a few albums, got the essence of him, enjoyed it and moved on. That's ok. The Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir had a fluke worldwide smash album with *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* and toured the world and then slipped back into relative obscurity. Just because I didn't become an expert in Bulgarian choral music or buy dozens of albums in that genre doesn't mean my passing love of their album was a fad or meaningless. (Check them out!) What's wrong with sampling all types of music, digging something and moving on? It's great! It's also cool if you dig deeper, of course and hearing *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis makes you a lifetime devotee of jazz with no time for anything else. Like me, it's probably been a long time since you listened to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (if you ever did at all). Now we have an unreleased gem recorded when he was at the height of his worldwide popularity and vocal powers. It's a stunner, reminding me why he became a sensation in the first place. I don't think I'll suddenly plunge deeper into his endless back catalog, but that's ok. That's the joy of this streaming era: it's easier than ever to check something out. If I turn you onto an artist the way so many others have turned me onto The Lemon Twigs and Beta Radio and so many others, I'll be thrilled.

--30--

POSTED BY MICHAEL GILTZ AT 3:50 P.M.



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