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THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2020

A Girl Called Eddy
Been Around

OLD MAN, LOOK AT YOURSELF: THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2020

By Michael Giltz

Ok, I'm officially old. I look at my list of the best albums of 2020 and think, "Hmm, that's pretty NPR." Sure, I keep up with the kids. I listen to the new stuff. I bop my head to the latest beats. You'll find Conejito Malo and Dua Lipa and Moses Sumney and the woefully under-appreciated Teyana Taylor alongside old friends of mine like Rumer and Green Day and Teddy Thompson, who isn't woefully under-appreciated, at least by me.

I can hold my head high, but it's an old head. I've followed that cliched path of hardcore music fans, from the pop music of my youth to a back flip into what came before (the Everly Brothers! Hank Williams!) to a growing pleasure in "mature" genres like jazz and classical. I'll probably end up 90 years old, sporting headphones in assisted living so I don't bother the other residents and debating Bach vs Beethoven (Bach, obviously) while obsessing over the Ring Cycle. (Already seen it, thanks to my friend Stephen. Loved it! But then any fan of *The Lord Of The Rings* will feel right at home with Wagner.) Yes, I'M OLD!

Heck, even the fact that I still think about music in terms of "albums" marks me as old. Here I am, extolling the joys of a well-chosen greatest hits album (my #2 pick) or comparing any woman with a smidgen of soulful cool to Dusty and Peggy Lee because they're my high water marks of a particular type of artistry.

Maybe I've always been old, musically speaking. My love for well written songs over the latest trend is genetic, not geriatric. I was always a little more Paul than John, so melody is big in my book. I instinctively trusted the lo-fi experimentation of *Ram* over the whacked-out experimentation of *Two Virgins* and that worked out pretty well. I never thought twice about loving a single by ABBA or even The Carpenters, before the Carpenters were (briefly) cool; a great song is a great song. Even as a kid, I liked musicals and standards and started digging into Sinatra and Crosby right alongside Sly and Creedence.

Give me an acoustic guitar, a good song and a great voice and I'm much more comfortable praising it to high heaven right off the bat (see: Rumer) instead of some clever bit of genre-smashing that's probably a cul-de-sac rather than the beginning of a whole new world. (But I'm not timid when it works. See: Lina.)

Besides, what's wrong with NPR? I've discovered some great music via NPR. I know people who work at NPR! They don't return my calls when I'm looking for a job, but I still like them and they have good taste. If NPR sounds too fusty for you, keep moving, nothing to see here. If NPR-like music for adults who want to hear great albums by veteran acts and get an idea of the best of the new talent sounds right up your alley, enjoy.

Below you'll find my list, followed by liner notes discussing what I love about each album at hand. If you like the artist or the genre or the classic acts I namecheck when describing a sound, the album I'm discussing is probably worth a listen to you. Let me know what's missing -- it's never too late for me to update this list with a gem I foolishly overlooked.

So here are 57 albums worth your time, no matter your age.

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2020 -- THE LIST

A GIRL CALLED EDDY -- *Been Around*
BEASTIE BOYS -- *Beastie Boys Music*
FIONA APPLE -- *Fetch The Bold Cutters*
BAD BUNNY -- *YHLQMDLG/Las Que No Iban A Salir/El Ultimo Tour Del Mundo* / THE MAVERICKS -- *En Español*
LINA RODRIGUEZ -- *Lina_Raul Refree*
CHUCK PROPHET -- *The Land That Time Forgot* /MIKE VIOLA -- *Godmuffin*
RUMER -- *Nashville Tears: The Songs Of Hugh Prestwood*
IMMANUEL WILKINS -- *Omega*
TEYANA TAYLOR -- *The Album* / SAULT -- *Untitled (Black Is)* and *Untitled (Rise)*
CLARICE JENSEN -- *The Experience Of Repetition As Death*/ OLAFUR ARNALDS -- *Some Kind Of Peace*

NEIL YOUNG -- *Homegrown* (recorded in 1975)
ELLA FITZGERALD -- *Ella: The Lost Berlin Tapes (Live)* (recorded in 1962)

BRANDY CLARK -- *Your Life Is A Record*
GREEN DAY -- *Father of All Motherfuckers*
DUA LIPA -- *Future Nostalgia*
SHARHABIL AHMED -- *The King Of Sudanese Jazz* /ONENESS OF JUJU -- *African Rhythms 1970-1982*
MARIA MCKEE -- *La Vita Nuova*
MOSES SUMNEY -- *grae*
PHOEBE BRIDGERS -- *Punisher* / HAIM -- *Women In Music III*
ROBERT CRAY -- *That's What I Heard* /ERROL LINTON -- *No Entry*
TEDDY THOMPSON -- *Heartbreaker Please*
TAMI NEILSON -- *Chickaboom!*

BARRY MANILOW -- *Night Songs II*
LIANNE LA HAVAS -- *Lianne La Havas*
HAROLD LOPEZ-NUSSA -- *Te Lo Dije*
THE STRUTS -- *Strange Days*
BOB DYLAN -- *Rough and Rowdy Ways*
HAROLD BUDD AND ROBIN GUTHRIE -- *Another Flower* / BRIAN ENO AND ROGER ENO -- *Mixing Colours*
FLEET FOXES -- *Shore*
GROUPE RTD -- *The Dancing Devils Of Djibouti*
BOB MOULD -- *Blue Hearts*
PHILIP GLASS -- *Music In Eight Parts* / TRISTAN PERICH -- *Drift Multiply*

STEVE EARLE -- *Ghosts Of West Virginia*
CARLA BLEY -- *Life Goes On* / JIMMY HEATH -- *Love Letter*
THE JAYHAWKS -- *Xoxo*
MICHAEL HARRISON W ROOMFUL OF TEETH -- *Just Constellations*
THE MAGNETIC FIELDS -- *Quickies* / SPARKS -- *A Steady Drip Drip Drip*
JOHN BEASLEY -- *MONK'estra Plays John Beasley*
JAKE BLOUNT -- *Spider Tales*
TONY ALLEN AND HUGH MASEKALA -- *Rejoice!*
PAUL WELLER -- *On Sunset*
ALEC BENJAMIN -- *These Two Windows* / ELLIOTT BROOD -- *Keeper*

THE BEST ALBUMS OF 2020 -- THE LINER NOTES

1-10

A GIRL CALLED EDDY -- *Been Around*

From the opening notes, this new album by A Girl Called Eddy sounds like an old friend. Sixteen years (!) after her debut, she kicks off this long player with a bit of spoken dialogue: "Girl, where you been?" Seriously, don't give me grief for being a few weeks late with my best-of-the-year list, alright? But how does she do it? Piano chords chime in, back-up vocals begin to coo and you immediately relax. This is going to be good; you just know it. And it is. Any album that's remotely personal stands in the shadow of Carole King's *Tapestry* and Joni Mitchell's *Blue*. Better to say this one has the same warm, confessional vibe of those two masterpieces. AGCE is her own talent, but let's do some name-checking: horns that echo Steely Dan on the opener "Been Around;" Pretenders-worthy crunch on "Someone's Gonna Break Your Heart" (that vocal quaver on "Someone's gonna make you cry" is pure Chrissie Hynde); lyrical details Elvis Costello would strive for; a wry wit, especially on the hilarious "Finest Actor" that Aimee Mann would appreciate; a general soulful vibe Boz Scaggs and Dusty Springfield would nod along with, such as on "Not That Sentimental Anymore." You get the idea: this is quality stuff. One great song after another and just when an album might fade in the home stretch she trots out "Finest Actor," singing, "He was the finest actor of his generation...he sure fooled me." I'd never stop laughing if she didn't also make that emotion cut deep. A Girl Called Eddy has a weatherbeaten heart on display in *Been Around* and it's beautiful to appreciate. The loping sentimentality of "Come To The Palisades!" the character sketches of "NY Man" and "Jody;" the beautifully crafted gem "Charity Shop Window" all comment on one another, creating an entire world in 11 tracks. I'm dipping into a track here and there to write these notes and each song stops me dead in my tracks. It's an honest to goodness ALBUM, not a mix tape, not a collection of tunes some of which might make it onto your playlist. And no you shouldn't listen to a song like "Been Around" and then let an algorithm send you off to Dusty or Carole or Aimee, however good each of them may be. You should listen to it from start to finish. Sometimes an album magically catches fire and in an alternate universe this is a blockbuster and playing in every store you wander into and all your friends begin conversations by saying, "Hey, have you heard this album by A Girl Called Eddy" and YOU WON'T CARE because it's so good and can't be overplayed. For now, it's our little secret. And I'm circling the year 2036 because I can't wait to hear what she does next.

BEASTIE BOYS -- *Beastie Boys Music*

As many of my friends know, my thesis paper in grad school was on The Rise and Fall of The Greatest Hits Album and Its Impact on Popular Music. Ok, it wasn't, but I MIGHT just publish a book called *The Greatest Greatest Hits Albums*. I'm fascinated by this subgenre of the near extinct category known as the album. Look at the Beastie Boys. It took three tries for them to get it right. In 1999, they released a two disc set called *Beastie Boys Anthology: The Sounds Of Science*. That collected 43 tracks and mixed in B-sides and unreleased tunes alongside the hits, which is almost NEVER the way to go. It's great for fans who already own everything and want some one-offs, but it results in an album no one will actually ever want to play from start to finish. *Solid Gold Hits* from 2005 had 15 songs and was more straightforward but still missing...something. But now they've dropped two tracks from that collection, inserted the original version of "Body Movin'" rather than the Fatboy Slim remix, added five more songs, fiddled with the playing order and dear god it's impressive. Twenty tracks that absolutely wow you with the band's greatness at singles. From start to finish you're blasted back in your seat by the pure rock n roll turn-it-up-loud joy of it all. This is sequenced to perfection and like Creedence Clearwater Revival's classic compilation *Chronicles*, it demands you reassess the greatness of this band. When I think of the Beasties, it's for *Paul's Boutique*...and a lot of other good albums, albums which I remember as veering back and forth from this style to that, hardcore punk to pop to goofy old school rap to deeply produced collages of sound and so on. Hearing these 20 songs back to back makes sense of it all, focusing on the brilliant singles and the overriding smarts and generous good fun of the band at its best. *Beastie Boys Music* immediately becomes a must-have hits set, a la *Eagles Greatest Hits, Vol. 2* or Elton John's *Greatest Hits* and *Greatest Hits Vol. 2* and Madonna's *Immaculate Collection* (props to her for having the Beasties open for Madge on a stadium tour). They're albums everyone should own. You think you know what you think about the Beastie Boys, but play this and you'll say, "Oh damn, that's right" and "I forgot about that one" and it's all so cohesive and smart and funny and catchy as hell. Drake desperately needs a defining greatest hits set to make sense of his endless stream of music. He can start by taking notes right here.

FIONA APPLE -- *Fetch The Bold Cutters*

My top three albums all jostled with one another for the top spot. Certainly this critically acclaimed work deserves all the attention in the world. A Girl Called Eddy's album is one you can play for almost anyone. Fiona Apple's *Fetch The Bolt Cutters* is one you play for yourself, the sort of album that hits someone at the right age and becomes The Most Important Art in the World to them, that one album or book or tv show or movie that speaks to them. It's also offhandedly brilliant with a kitchen sink production, compellingly repetitive lyrics and raw passion. Like the best art, it's also very, very funny. Apple has a mad gleam in her eye on the album cover but it's really the look of anticipation: this album will subvert and thrill and off-balance and kill you in the best possible sense and she can't wait to see your reaction. Tracks are built upon handclaps, dogs bark in the background (she recorded much of it on her own), words are held for far longer than you expect (like "you" in the opener "I Want You To Love Me" as in "I want youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu to love me") and she growls and sings off key because who gives a damn and she laughs and goes off on tangents and SHE IS IN CONTROL, fellas, so deal with it. How can anyone not get excited when she says "Fetch the bolt cutters!" in the title track? How can you not laugh on "Under The Table" when she describes being dragged to a dinner party she does NOT want to attend and no she's not going to behave herself, whatever you think THAT means and she says, "Kick me under the table all that you want/ I won't shut up, I *won't* shut up." In the same song, she begins a cappella by singing in a child's sing-song melody, "I would beg to disagree but begging disagrees with me." I don't mean to over-emphasize the comedy -- this album covers rape and anger and the vulnerability of deciding you're enough on your own, among other empowering moments -- but really, who else sings a song to the future girlfriends of her ex on "For Her" and makes it so awesome without ever seeming petty? If you like this album, you'll actually love it. No half measures here. Much like Fiona Apple herself, who focused her album title to a pithy four words, but lets it all hang out.

BAD BUNNY -- *YHLQMDLG/Las Que No Iban A Salir/El Ultimo Tour Del Mundo* / **THE MAVERICKS** -- *En Español*

If I was naming an ARTIST of the year, it would be Puerto Rico's Bad Bunny, who also had two albums on my 2019 list. He announced he'd retire from music at the end of 2020, was profiled in the New York Times Magazine with all the seriousness his talent deserves, put out three albums, was cast in an action film with Brad Pitt (a jump the shark moment or the start of something good), became the first artist in history to top the Billboard Top 200 album chart with an all-Spanish language album (*El Ultimo Tour Del Mundo*) and announced yeah, maybe he WOULDN'T stop making music after 2020, thank God even though I never bought that in the first place. (But then, what the hell happened to Manu Chao, so who knows?) Three albums are a lot to take in and that doesn't even include some one-off singles and videos he also put out. I think *YHLQMDLG* is the best place to start here. Mr Bunny is a compelling singer with the best, most emotive grunts since James Brown, which is saying something. Let's hope he catches his breath, focuses and delivers his next album with the purpose and passion that talent deserves. Like Prince, it's all pretty awesome but it's also a LOT to deal with. Help us out, Bad Bunny; do the editing for us.

While Bad Bunny has always recorded in Spanish, the Mavericks never recorded an entire album in Spanish until now. They're one of the greatest live acts I've ever seen and I can't wait to hear them perform this barn burner in concert. Those with more knowledge than me can parse all the traditions and geographic sources for these tunes. It's virtually a master class in the styles of the Spanish diaspora. All I know is I'm riveted from start to finish by the band's passion and playing that supports the soaring, thrilling voice of lead singer Raul Malo. A new peak from one of the greats. It's romantic, turbulent, gorgeous and demands to be heard live. Streaming their various concerts online is fun but a poor, poor substitute for the real thing.

LINA RODRIGUEZ -- *Lina_Raul Refree*

Artist Raul Refree once collaborated with singer Rosalia. She went on to major fame, becoming the first Spanish-singing act to get a Grammy nomination for Best New Artist and just put out a duet with...Bad Bunny. Refree shows even better taste by creating this bold album with Lina Rodriguez. Rodriguez sings fado, a Portuguese style of music that embodies a sort of nostalgic sadness. Traditionally, it's performed to guitar accompaniment, but here Rodriguez sings alongside piano. Big deal, right? This may seem a pretty modest change to you and me, but it's earthshaking in the context of fado. Rodriguez goes much farther than that: the music on this album has an ambient, melancholic vibe involving textures and sounds that allow Lina's voice to float in and out of the shadows. It's gorgeous, ear-catching and deeply in keeping with the intent of the genre. It's not like they slapped on a techno beat or rocked out, but traditionalists are clutching their pearls. Even on tracks where Rodriguez sings with just piano, you sense it's bold. And when the final track "Voz Amália de Nós" features Lina Rodriquez alongside a traditional guitar accompaniment, it's a gesture of solidarity with the past AND an assured statement: I can do it this way, too; I choose not to. Now put all that aside. If you're like me, you'll just put this on and be swept up in gorgeous singing and a mood of sophisticated regret perfect for rainy days and whenever you're in that particular mood that calls for French films, world-weariness and a little modern fado.

CHUCK PROPHET -- *The Land That Time Forgot* /**MIKE VIOLA** -- *Godmuffin*

File these under "Grizzled Veteran Delivers The Album You Knew They Always Had In Them." Think John Hiatt's *Bring The Family,* Paul Weller's *Stanley Road,* Bonnie Raitt's *Nick Of Time* (without the commercial oomph), Jesse Winchester's *Love Filling Station* and gosh, I could go on. Chuck Prophet really hits it out of the park on *The Land That Time Forgot*. He's got the right backing band, the right songs, the right voice at this stage of his career and he knows what he's doing and he knows he knows what he's doing, but it's a source of pride now rather than frustration. I'm a late convert to Prophet, though I dug 2014's *Night Surfer*. The opening track "Best Shirt On" is just fine. But from the all-too-timely second track "High As Johnny Thunders" onward he's delivering the goods. Hell, maybe the dream of having the world pay attention has faded but he's comfortable with that now and singing about love and heartache and the passage of time to some friends he's made along the way and that's plenty good. He even delivers not one but TWO good political songs: the spooky, empathetic "Nixonland" and the hilarious "Get Off The Stage." (Please, get off the stage.) Mike Viola is almost as good on *Godmuffin*; fans of Candy Butcher will love it and if you're like me, it'll send you back to his catalog wondering why you've never listened to him before.

RUMER -- *Nashville Tears: The Songs Of Hugh Prestwood*

A bigger star in the UK, Rumer is gifted with a voice of stop-you-in-your-tracks purity, akin to Karen Carpenter or Linda Thompson. She gained industry attention with covers of songs by Burt Bacharach sung so easily (which they ain't) that Bacharach himself began touting her talents to one and all. Rumer is also a marvelous songwriter, but she's not a particularly prolific one. I mean, she's no A Girl Called Eddy, but they're not pouring out of her. So her releases have varied from Bacharach to originals to random gems back to some originals and now a tribute to Nashville songwriter Hugh Prestwood. No, I'd never heard of him either. The man's apparently a bit of a pill, retrograde old school Nashville in the worst sense of the phrase. But his songs are far more generous and open-hearted than the guy's blog would suggest he is and it's another good reminder to not confuse the artist with the art. (Here, if you must.) God knows Rumer could sing a song even I wrote and make it sound delightful, but that only works at first blush. Really live with a recording and the best voice in the world won't make up for a weak tune. Backed by gorgeous strings in arrangements that balance countrypolitan with simpler settings, the songs shine. "The Fate Of Fireflies" compares the dying number of those insects to a dying love. "Oklahoma Stray" is one of those unforgivable heart-tuggers Nashville delights in, rescued here by a simple acoustic guitar backed by spare touches. "The Song Remembers When" is an ode to how important moments in life can become indelibly linked to certain tunes. Really, only the modestly jingoistic "The Snow White Rows Of Arlington" strikes a discordant note. (They killed us first, it says, justifying all wars from now until doomsday.) Everything else is good to great and it's delivered with that voice of Rumer's: intimate, warm, engaging and confident like few you'll ever hear. Like Peggy Lee, she can sing quietly and make you lean in closer. Upbeat it's not; the modest lope of "Hard Times For Lovers" and "Bristlecone Pine" is about as frantic as this ever gets. You won't mind.

IMMANUEL WILKINS -- *Omega*

In the last few years, I've been listening to more new jazz than I have in ages. Is it because of a musical renaissance in that genre or because Spotify and the like make it easier than ever to check an album out? A little of both, I'm sure. But listen to *Omega*, however, and you won't doubt the renaissance. It's bursting with talent on display that demands attention must be paid. From the presentation of the music to the command of the form to the confidently ambitious sweep of it all, you immediately know this is firmly in the mold of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* and not shy to say so. And this is his debut!

TEYANA TAYLOR -- *The Album* / **SAULT** -- *Untitled (Black Is)* and *Untitled (Rise)*

At 15, Teyana Taylor was choreographing a music video for Beyoncé. At 16, she was signed to a record deal and soon writing songs for others, when not popping up on a track for Jay-Z. She tossed in acting while releasing mixtapes and two albums that never got onto my radar. Taylor then contributed to Kanye West's best album (*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*), felt trapped by her record deal, got out of it and now here she is with what seemed to me like a remarkable debut filled with big names like Missy Elliot, Rick Ross, Erykah Badu and even Lauryn Hill. And yet it doesn't feel like an all-star jam, just some names popping in as needed. Teyana Taylor is front and center here, the way Solange is front and center on her music, no matter how many other artists may be circling the sun of her talent. Taylor's married, she's a mother and she's a woman, which seems obvious until she makes clear the multiplicity of meaning behind all of those words. *The Album* has a 90s vibe but isn't retro. It's forward looking, deeply felt, fully realized and despite debuting in Billboard's Top 10 feels shockingly overlooked. Taylor seems to agree; she's announced she'll retire from the music making side of her creativity because it wasn't hosanna'd enough. (Maybe Kanye West rubbed off on her?) Still, I understand her being miffed -- this has the chops and artistry to receive all the critical and commercial acclaim she expected. But Lauryn Hill might tell her all that attention isn't so helpful. And Solange demonstrates true satisfaction comes from making the music you need, not the music you think the world will want.

In contrast, Sault is an anonymous collective choosing not to put a face to its work. That mysterious backstory leads to all sorts of questions about who is behind it and why they don't want their fame interfering with how the music is considered. It would be cool to find out they've pulled a JK Rowling and that someone like John Legend figured going out on the ledge would play better if critics didn't realize it was him doing it. The result is pointed, political agitprop in the most positive, BLM marching-with-your-friends manner. It's righteous, eclectic and inspiring. Hat tip to whomever you are, Sault.

CLARICE JENSEN -- *The Experience Of Repetition As Death*
OLAFUR ARNALDS -- *Some Kind Of Peace*

Have cello, will travel. Clarice Jensen's debut album in 2018 included collaborations with the late Johann Johannsson and Michael Harrison, reason enough to check her out. Toss in work with everyone from Nick Cave to Nico Muhly (the guy knows how to make connections!) to Beirut and she's cooler than thou. For her second album, Jensen is truly solo, using every recording trick in the book to create a soundscape with her cello. It's bewitching, disciplined and essential listening for anyone who cares about modern classical music.

Icelandic artist Olafur Arnalds is a multi-instrumentalist who collaborates with all sorts of acts when not composing solo pieces of an ambient nature. Here he's in a mellow mode, weaving in ethnographic recordings on "Woven Song" a la Moby, but mostly delivering Brian Eno-like soundscapes. So much of ambient music drives me nuts, with its wallpaper vibe precisely what I don't want out of music. I never want music to fade into the background. *Some Kind Of Peace* never does that because it has the melodies to hold my attention. I can't precisely detail what's different on this from a ton of similar albums I toss aside after one listen. But I know it when I hear it.

10++

NEIL YOUNG -- *Homegrown* (recorded in 1975)
ELLA FITZGERALD -- *Ella: The Lost Berlin Tapes (Live)* (recorded in 1962)

Unquestionably two of the best albums released in 2020. Except one is a live recording from 1962 and the other is a shelved studio album from 1975. Both have already been slotted into their respective years on my master list of the best albums of all time, year by year. In 1975, Neil Young couldn't decide whether he should release the searing outpouring of grief that is *Tonight's The Night* or the pastoral, hugely appealing follow-up to *Harvest* that is *Homegrown*. The latter might have turned Young into a commercial juggernaut again and his label said, "Oh, that one, please!" Naturally, he put out *Tonight's The Night* and shelved *Homegrown* for 45 years. Later in 1975 he also released the marvelous *Zuma*. So Young might have put out THREE great albums that year because *Homegrown* is a delight. I prefer it to *Harvest*, actually; heck, I prefer *Harvest Moon* and *Silver and Gold* to *Harvest*, which has never spoken to me the way it does to so many others. (And I *love* mellow, country-ish Neil.) *Homegrown* is eccentric, amusing and bursting with great songs. Only someone like Young could leave this on the shelf for so long. I'm even more ornery when it comes to Ella Fitzgerald and her classic live album *Ella In Berlin: Mack The Knife*. That 1960 release contains her famous botched performance of "Mack The Knife" where she forgets the lyrics and improvises new lines to the delight of one and all. It's a peak moment in all of popular music, but the rest of the album never worked for me as well. It's fine but that's not enough since Ella ALWAYS kills in concert. I love *Ella In Rome: The Birthday Concert*, the overwhelming boxed set *Twelve Nights In Hollywood* and countless other live performances to the one that's now cemented in legend. Heck, she returned to Berlin in 1961 and that live concert is superior to the first. Now this concert from Ella's return to Berlin (again again!) in 1962 is better still. She scats, she sings, she dutifully tosses in new lyrics to "Mack The Knife" and makes it sound fresh and thrilling just like she would do for the rest of her life. If you have any affection for either artist, snap these up.

11-20

BRANDY CLARK -- *Your Life Is A Record*

Sure, you've got your Sturgill Simpsons and Chris Stapletons and the like. But women are where it's at in country music right now. Case in point this stellar album by one of the best around.

MOSES SUMNEY -- *grae*

Someone's been paying attention to Maxwell! State of the art souful r&b.

DUA LIPA -- *Future Nostalgia*

Just when we can't boogie on the dance floor, Dua Lipa gives us the disco album we needed to remind ourselves exactly what we're missing. Pure pop, pure pleasure.

SHARHABIL AHMED -- *The King Of Sudanese Jazz* / **ONENESS OF JUJU** -- *African Rhythms 1970-1982*

World music or global music or whatever I'm supposed to call the music from other parts of the planet that captures the attention of my white, American, Euro-centric ear often tosses up delights like this. This compilation of the driving pop music of Sudan pioneered by Sharhabil Ahmad is NOT jazz -- it's a gumbo with the sole intention of making you groove. And you will. You'll hear precious little Miles Davis here but a lot of surf rock, r&b, calypso, Congolese and more mixed up right. It makes a hash of anyone who thinks music from other countries is "pure" or "traditional" or uncorrupted by other cultures. People in Sudan were jamming out to Chuck Berry just like the Beatles were in Liverpool and this hard-driving stuff is the result. I haven't a clue as to what they're singing about but it's got a beat and you can dance to it. Why wait for director Jim Jarmusch to soundtrack this on one of his films before getting wise?

In contrast, we've got the engagingly funky music of James "Plunky" Branch, crafted all on its lonesome in Virginia. *Virginia*? Virginia. Plunky keeps renaming his bands, from Juju to Oneness of Juju to Plunky and the Oneness of Juju to just plain ole Plunky and Oneness. Go with it, spin the first track "African Rhythms" and you will be gone. How has director Quentin Tarantino not snapped this up yet? (I've got to do my best movies of the year list next and I've got directors on the brain.) I know the term lost whatever cachet it had but this is pure 1970s AfroCentrism in the most delightful, hip-shaking way. One or two songs go modestly astray on this 24 track compilation but the vast majority is off-the-charts good, even if Plunky *did* chart in Europe for one brief, shining I've-got-a-hit moment. Think Kool & The Gang or George Clinton and get on it. If this is hiding out in Virginia, how much great stuff is tucked away in various corners of America, just waiting to be (re)discovered?

MARIA MCKEE -- *La Vita Nuova*

Oh, wait, you mean Maria McKee was never a huge star? Her band Lone Justice didn't conquer the world, say the way Talking Heads did? And McKee hasn't gone on to a solo career as significant and interesting and commercial as David Byrne or Sting or whomever else you want to name? Well, they did and she has, as far as I'm concerned. Whether it's her marvelous solo debut or the classic song for the ages "Life Is Sweet" or her many other strong records, Maria McKee looms large for me. Here she is, 35 years into her recorded life, offering up 14 strong tracks, pushing her voice into new realms, baring her soul and being true to herself, as she always has. Ten albums in and she's hitting new peaks. Life *is* sweet.

GREEN DAY -- *Father of All Motherfuckers*

That was close! *American Idiot* is their masterpiece, their Who-ish triumph of seriousness and high concept. But it almost ended them -- once you get serious and high concept, it's hard to go back to stoopid. They awkwardly tried to repeat the trick with *21st Century Breakdown*, shoveled out the hasty *Uno! Dos! Tres!* albums (editing: the lost art), righted the ship with the very good *Revolution Radio* and now fully maintain their mojo with the bratty, funny, punky, poppy but SERIOUS *Father of All Motherfuckers*. They figured out Sturm und Drang ain't the only way to fight the power.

PHOEBE BRIDGERS -- *Punisher* / **HAIM** -- *Women In Music III*

My top picks for the past four years have been by women. Six of the last ten top picks have been albums by women. That's the most...ever! And that explains why Maria McKee and Haim and Phoebe Bridgers aren't all in the top ten this year. Women aren't just killing it in country. Mind you, most of my releases this year are from men. We can't overcome all the barriers keeping women from reaching their potential all at once. But when given the chance they deliver, as on Haim's *Women In Music III* and Bridgers' terrific *Punisher*.

ROBERT CRAY -- *That's What I Heard* /**ERROL LINTON** -- *No Entry*

Every day, every day I sing the blues. Okay, not EVERY day. But it's tempting when rock solid releases come out from the resurgent but still smooth Robert Cray and new-to-me Errol Linton. Veterans doing their stuff. Listen to them and you'll struggle to remember why you DON'T sing or at least listen to the blues every day. Very satisfying.

TEDDY THOMPSON -- *Heartbreaker Please*

Like Chris Isaak, Teddy Thompson is a puzzle. He's marvelously gifted, handsome and built for success. Why aren't they superstars? Except maybe for the fact that Teddy's talent is downbeat, subtle and rueful. I guess rueful doesn't bring dollar signs to the eyes of record label execs. As always, his music would play beautifully on the radio, this time with some punch from horns for good measure. It's not really a surprise he's never become a commercial juggernaut. He'll just have to settle for literate pop offered to adults smart enough to catch on. Dig Ron Sexsmith or Neil Finn? Dig in!

TAMI NEILSON -- *Chickaboom!*

Ok, the MINUTE we're out of lockdown and we can travel again, let's all hop onto a plane and head to New Zealand and catch Canadian singer Tami Neilson in action. She sports a beehive hairdo and has the 50s chick-a-boom sound to match. Powerhouse vocals, catchy as hell songs, fun for miles -- you just know if you see her in concert in some smoky dive that she'll knock your socks off and bring you to Jesus, assuming Jesus is an undiscovered Elvis or a crazy female cross between Little Richard and Hank Williams. Why David Lynch hasn't cast her in one of his movies yet is a mystery. Just play the first track "Call Your Mama" and you'll be sold.

21-30

BARRY MANILOW -- *Night Songs II*

Who knew hit songwriter Barry Manilow would do his best work covering the songs of others? I don't mean his blockbuster albums *The Greatest Songs Of The Fifties/Sixties/Seventies* and *Eighties*. (Apparently there are no *Greatest Songs Of The Nineties* or surely Clive Davis would have insisted.) No, Manilow is not in best form when going big, so even albums with big bands don't quite work for him. He really shines at the piano, quiet, controlled and focused on the lyrics. Every once in a while, he knuckles down and does it right. *2:00 A.M. Paradise Cafe* is his nightclub masterpiece. But he's also got *Night Songs* from 2014 and now *Night Songs II,* piano-centric albums with the usual standards but done with such care and insight it doesn't matter that he's older and his voice might waver a little. He's older, yes, but wiser and he knows how to sing 'em. Oh he writes the hit songs. (Though not, ironically, "I Write The Songs.") And I enjoy many of those catchy numbers from his commercial heyday. But here, he's an interpreter and in excellent form and -- I imagine -- happier than ever.

LIANNE LA HAVAS -- *Lianne La Havas*

Three album in eight years? Fine, take your time. After the modest dip of her second album *Blood*, La Havas is firmly back in control. Graceful guitar work, quiet, powerful and assured.

HAROLD LOPEZ-NUSSA -- *Te Lo Dije*

I told you to pay attention to Cuban pianist Harold Lopez-Nussa. His latest is pure pleasure. Why dazzle with technical skill or classical allusions when you can party? Lopez-Nussa almost makes me like "The Windmills Of Your Mind" and the rest is a gas.

THE STRUTS -- *Strange Days*

A peacock of a strutting rock band, built for stadiums and more, More, MORE! Great fun.

BOB DYLAN -- *Rough and Rowdy Ways*

I am all in on late period Bob, from his dive into the Great American Songbook usually sung by Sinatra and Ella to full-on 17 minute wig-outs where his references are so amusingly of-the-moment you feel like he's daring you. *Yeah, that's right, I won the Nobel Prize for Literature and I just name-checked Indiana Jones. You got a problem with that?* The long sprawling tunes here keep me transfixed. The shorter tracks don't quite have the same pull, but they're never less than enjoyable. Unlike the recent marvelous albums of standards (*Triplicate, Fallen Angel*), this one didn't deepen on repeated listens. Still, he's got nothing left to prove but he keeps proving it.

HAROLD BUDD AND ROBIN GUTHRIE -- *Another Flower* / **BRIAN ENO AND ROGER ENO** -- *Mixing Colours*

Brian Eno is the Zelig of popular music, creating entire genres, helping other artists like Bowie and U2 do their best and tossing off superior solo work with disarming regularity, like this ambient collaboration with his brother. Eno worked with Harold Budd and of course that album (*The Pearl*) proved to be one of the peaks of Budd's career. Budd just died, but not before releasing one final album with HIS long-time collaborator Robin Guthrie of Cocteau Twins. Eno or no Eno, they did some of their best work together, creating about five albums over the last 34 years. Like Olafur Arnalds, they thrive on strong melodies.

FLEET FOXES -- *Shore*

Not many bands can claim a distinctive sound. But as soon as Fleet Foxes begin, those massed harmonies and that hip updating of folkie CSN on steroids kick in and you know who it is. After a little spinning of wheels where they seemed out of ideas, the band is fired with new purpose here. If you fell hard for their debut, dive back in.

GROUPE RTD -- *The Dancing Devils Of Djibouti*

The backstory is almost as compelling as the music. Groupe RTD is the house band of the African nation of Djibouti. And they can rock, not that anyone gets to hear them do their stuff at official state ceremonies. The record label Ostinato gained access to the archives of the country's music, only to discover a world class band in the studio next door. Years of negotiation took place, followed by the label flying in a mobile recording studio and hastily recording the band in three days. Helmed by Mohamed Abdi Alto on saxophone, it's an infectious blending of influences, probably frowned upon by the government and the first international release in the country's history. Despite its Cinderella origins, the music banishes all such knowledge with infectious glee.

BOB MOULD -- *Blue Hearts*

Oh he's pissed and it's a pleasure to hear. One of Mould's best solo works and a reminder of how vital Hüsker Dü remains.

PHILIP GLASS -- *Music In Eight Parts* / **TRISTAN PERICH** -- *Drift Multiply*

Finally, a proper recording of one of Glass's seminal pieces. For aficionados only but they'll revel in it. One of the many composers standing in his shadow is Tristan Perich, here with a compelling new piece titled *Drift Multiply*. It expands and contracts and folds in on itself and then flowers out again, finding endless possibilities in its initial melody. Like Glass's style on *Music In Eight Parts,* which many dismissed as a self-referential dead end but which opened up new avenues artists like Perich continue to travel on to this day.

31-40

STEVE EARLE -- *Ghosts Of West Virginia*

I still think of Steve Earle's career as before and after prison or before and after his heroin addiction and recovery. We had four albums, a five year break when it seemed like we might lose him forever and since 1995 about 15 or so albums that amount to one hell of a body of work. So the vast majority of his career happened long after those dark days yet I still often think how grateful I am he made it through. The focus and fury of *Ghosts Of West Virginia* make this one of his best and that's saying something. "Devil Put The Coal In The Ground," "John Henry Was A Steel-Driving Man" (a song written because he was pissed his son JT had a John Henry song and he didn't!), the chilling "It's About Blood" when he reads a roll call of dead miners -- this is music with a purpose that would make Woody Guthrie proud. Hell, Guthrie was railing against the same crimes (dangerous working conditions, companies that don't give a damn, the fact that there's no dignity in dying for someone else's profit) a hundred years ago. That's depressing as hell, but Earle gives voice to the angry with songs that will hopefully one day be stories of the past, rather than a rallying cry for the future. Already in 2021, he's delivered a proud and joyful covers album called *J.T.*, doing right by some of the best songs by his late son, a songwriter who *didn't* make it through, more's the pity.

CARLA BLEY -- *Life Goes On*
JIMMY HEATH -- *Love Letter*

Bley is 81 years old and her trio is in peak form. This riveting album contains three suites with Bley on piano, Mike Swallow on electric bass guitar and Andy Sheppard on sax. Though even to talk about the three of them individually is to mislead. They are as *one* here, switching from bluesy and playful to dark to humorous, always in sync and speaking with one voice. Should be higher on this list.

A swan song for the late Jimmy Heath, who recorded *Love Letter* just days before his 93rd birthday. Remarkably, he'd just been signed to a multi-album deal. A 92 year old being signed to a multi-album deal? Wishful thinking? Not when you listen to it -- Heath is fully in command and sounds like he has miles to go before he sleeps. Enjoy *Love Letter* and you won't be shocked he was just signed to a new record deal; you'll be shocked he died. Very satisfying, and not by grading on a curve.

THE JAYHAWKS -- *Xoxo*

A quietly great band, reinvigorated this time around by having everyone chip in on lyrics and vocals. Keyboardist Karen Grotberg impresses the most, but it's the genuine sense of a band doing what it does best and stretching out as a team that makes this satisfying.

MICHAEL HARRISON W ROOMFUL OF TEETH -- *Just Constellations*

Composer Michael Harrison is famed for creating the "harmonic piano" and becoming fascinated with sustained notes. He collaborated with the vocal ensemble Roomful Of Teeth to see how sustained notes might sound when transferred from instruments to singers. He composed music specifically for their eight voices, took feedback, fine tuned it and the result is *Just Constellations,* a 22 minute piece that director Stanley Kubrick would have jumped on for *2001: A Space Odyssey* if only this music could go back in time or he could come forward. It's lovely, haunting, other-worldly.

THE MAGNETIC FIELDS -- *Quickies* / **SPARKS** -- *A Steady Drip Drip Drip*

Humor is woefully under-appreciated in rock and roll, aggressively *resisted*, even. Nonetheless, it's a key component in a lot of great art and you can find it in spades with Magnetic Fields and The Sparks. Fields' marshall Stephen Merritt does best when giving himself some arbitrary rules and restrictions. Here he delivers 28 songs, all under three minutes and many not even 2 minutes or even one minute long. Not to worry; he packs in multiple styles, wickedly funny characters, pathos, sex and romance, just like any quickie. The Sparks are almost funnier, with songs about a man who really loves his lawnmower to "Stravinsky's Only Hit" and the climate crisis plea "Please Don't Fuck Up My World." Really, is it asking so much, especially when said world can produce a band as eccentric and certifiable as The Sparks? I can't for the life of me understand why I don't play them more often, but whenever I do I'm happy.

JOHN BEASLEY -- MONK'estra Plays John Beasley

Beasley does Monk doing Beasley. Again. (The third in a series.) Everyone wins.

JAKE BLOUNT -- *Spider Tales*

This project is rife with self-serious purpose: to reclaim the impassioned angry voices of color threaded throughout the folk music of America, with a side trip into gender studies. Not to fear, the result makes all its valid and illuminating points via stellar musicianship, verve and showmanship. Blount knows above all the music must hold its audience or the singer can't deliver any message at all. It took me ages to give this a listen because I was wary of the scholarly vibes that stories about it gave off, rather than listening to the music itself. Don't make the same mistake.

TONY ALLEN AND HUGH MASEKALA -- *Rejoice!*

What a grab-bag of an album. Afrobeat founder Tony Allen and the legendary Hugh Masekala finally found a chance to collaborate on songs together. Then the random tracks laid dormant for years and then Masekala died. Allen took the sign from above and gathered up those songs, added in some of his solo work and got their music out to the world just weeks before *he* died. Despite the disparate sources, it all somehow hangs together and is indeed worth rejoicing over.

PAUL WELLER -- *On Sunset*

Paul Weller is a giant in the UK, thanks to seminal work in The Jam, his left-turn with the blue-eyed music of The Style Council and finally solo work that has proven more all-embracing than one could have ever imagined from that punk pop start. Think Eric Clapton to grasp Weller's decades-long impact. in his home country. *Stanley Road* is his key solo work and while nothing will ever match that album's influence, he's in excellent form with *On Sunset,* aging gracefully and with his chops intact.

ALEC BENJAMIN -- *These Two Windows* / **ELLIOTT BROOD** -- *Keeper*

I keep listening to these two acts. Alec Benjamin is a thriving young talent who is improving all the time. He was on the verge of a commercial breakthrough when COVID struck. A singer-songwriter with a strong female fan base, he's emo-y and clever and his skills have grown tremendously, building from gimmicky O. Henry-like story songs with a twist alongside weird vocal tics turned into stronger and stronger storytelling and a growing melodicism. He's got *something* and it keeps me coming back. Those teen girls are on to something.

And Elliott Brood is the closest I've ever come to being an A&R man. My nephew in Toronto took us to a bar many many years ago where some live music was playing. The duo onstage sported a banjo, which was not typical *at all* at the time for a rock band. They were just a local band with a self-made CD to hawk. I listened to one song and then another and then another and they were GOOD and then they played a song that screamed out "hit" to me. That's a hit, I thought! (It's their road song "Oh, Alberta!" Canada's answer to songs like "Dancing In The Streets" and "R.O.C.K. In The U.S.A." that namecheck major cities.) I mean I seriously thought, with the right promotion...! I was so jazzed by the quality that despite being a wallflower, I introduced myself afterwards and said, Hey, I live in NYC and if you ever come to town and need a place to crash, just say the word. They were excited, imagining for a moment I might actually be somebody. I wasn't but I would have hawked them to radio and pr people and record label folk in a heartbeat...if I knew any. I gave them my phone number but we never spoke again in that pre-internet era. So I was thrilled and vindicated when they actually signed with a label and released albums and here they are almost 20 years and nine albums later, still doing their thing. Now they're singing about how hard it is to still be chasing the dream when you've got a family and a "real" life and responsibility and if this is what you're supposed to be doing shouldn't you be...you know, bigger? More popular? In "Stay Out," they sing about having healthy kids and a beautiful wife but "I don't want to go home/And I can't go home." They're lifers, making the best damn music they can, pulling all-nighters going from one town to the next and missing home but they have to keep going because if they ever stop it'll end for good and then where the hell will they be and what did it all mean? They're lifers. And I'm a lifer too, still listening to new music and making my damn lists. Once those lists were published in newspapers or magazines or websites reaching a wide readership, sharing with people I never met the movies and music and books and tv shows I liked. I actually got paid for writing them. Now it's just a list on a blog and I keep the list just so my old brain doesn't forget the music I listened to and loved just a few months ago. How will I know what I think if I don't make a list? I don't want to go home, I can't go home, not with more plays to see and more movies to watch and more books to read and more albums to hear. And more lists to make.

POSTED BY MICHAEL GILTZ AT 10:00 AM

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MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

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