

All this and it's only July

Anyone who thinks contemporary music is a pale shadow of the glory days of the '60s simply isn't paying attention. Today's superstars — Springsteen, Prince, U2, Michael Jackson, etc. — are at least as interesting as their counterparts of the past. The underground scene is as vital and stable as ever. Rap, hip-hop, speed metal and the pervasive influence of "world music" are keeping the music itself fresh.

The result is that the last few years have frequently produced more than 10 good albums apiece.

So here is a mid-year check on the best so far.

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I haven't fleshed out my list with off-beat choices or included someone just to give them exposure. These are twelve terrific albums that deserve to be listened to and enjoyed.

1. Elvis Costello / *Spike* Yet another collection of sharp and witty numbers from an artist who is as prolific as he is good. Though filled with quirky arrangements and odd instruments, *Spike* never seems purposefully eclectic. It simply presents 15 songs in the best way possible. Brilliant.

2. Chris Isaak / *Heart-Shaped World* He sings like a cross between Presley and Orbison and looks like James Dean. This is his third impeccable album and it charts the same lonely but powerful territory of the first two. Only a force of nature could keep Isaak from becoming a major star.

3. Lou Reed / *New York* Suddenly, out of nowhere, Reed has recorded one of the sharpest and funniest albums of his career. *New York* is gritty, angry and actually manages to live up to its title.

4. K.D. Lang and The Reclines / *Absolute Torch and Twang* An androgynous country artist, Lang charmed critics with her off-beat debut, then charmed everyone else with last year's *Shadowland*, a simmering, beautiful collection of country standards. Now she combines the best of those two albums on *Torch and Twang*. Lang has a marvelous voice and invests every song with passion and charm. Sheer fun.

5. Philip Glass / *1000 Airplanes On The Roof* Best known for his operas, Glass occasionally throws off weak, derivative scores for outside projects. But his score for this off-Broadway multi-media production is invigorating and fresh. An excellent introduction to his music.

6. XTC / *Oranges and Lemons* A trippy, delightful collection of songs about pink balloons, scarecrow people and kings for a day. Densely produced, this opens up after a few listens on headphones. Like wow.

7. Peter Gabriel / *Passion* Gabriel's score for *The Last Temptation of Christ* is finally available,

along with some music that didn't make the final cut. Built around traditional melodies from Armenia, Egypt and other countries, it is a natural extension of Gabriel's interest in African rhythms.

8. Maria McKee The singer of Lone Justice sets out on her own with marvelous results. Her songwriting is stronger than ever and the singing couldn't get much better. Still influenced by country, McKee's solo work sounds like less of a pose than her previous group's efforts.

9. Bob Mould / *Workbook* The former member of Hüsker Dü reveals a relatively pensive side on his first solo album. The guitar-playing is still incisive, but it's a far cry from the thrash of his old band. The songwriting is equally quiet and reflective.

10. Beleza Tropical / *Brazil Classics 1* Compiled by David Byrne, this gathers 18 classics from such major Brazilian figures as Jorge Ben and Gilberto Gil. Not as immediately infectious as the recent scattering of African compilations, but ultimately just as satisfying.

11. John Cougar Mellencamp / *Big Daddy* His last album was more fiery and angry, but *Big Daddy* has equally insightful songs and its doubting, resigned air is a refreshing change of pace for the usually boastful Mellencamp.

12. Peter Case / *The Man with the Blue post-modern fragmented neo-traditionalist Guitar* A little more open and warm than his widely acclaimed debut, this holds a quiet charm. Half folkie, half rocker, Case writes about the down-but-not-out and gives them

dignity. A few too many vague love songs, but well worth the listen.