

1000 albums to hear before you die

After much debate, some of it bitter, the Guardian's music team has compiled a list of albums that are well worth your hearing. What did we miss?

Michael Hann
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Guardian Unlimited

This week, we are printing five free magazines (available online [here](#)) in which the Guardian's music team - after much debate, some of it bitter - suggest 1000 albums that are well worth your hearing. What it's not is the best 1000 albums of all time. Instead, it's a cross-genre, cross-era look at some great music.

So what were the rules for picking the 1000?

First, no single act can appear more than once - though where an artist has collaborated widely, they might pop up all over the place, as Brian Eno and Damon Albarn do.

Second, where there was a good alternative to the blindingly obvious album, we went for the alternative. After all, who needs to be told, yet again, to buy Revolver or Pet Sounds?

Third, we're happy to have a slew of Various Artists albums, because there are plenty of underground scenes whose best songs came in the form of singles - why buy a Standells album when you can hear the great Nuggets compilation?

Fourth, there are a ton of little-known personal favourites in here. So when you stumble over a title you've never heard of, it's because at least one of our writers desperately wants you to hear it.

We want your help, too. Which albums have we missed? Let us know by [posting on the blog](#) or emailing us at film&music@guardian.co.uk. Tell us which album you would have included, and why it's so great. We'll print the best submissions in next week's Film & Music.

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Artists beginning with A

Saturday November 17, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

A Certain Ratio
Early (2002)

Named after a Brian Eno lyric, ACR fused jagged Wire guitars and George Clinton beats to create the now commonplace sound of punk-funk. They were too far ahead of their time to be successful, but Early compiles the 1978-85 cuts that influenced everyone from former ACR support acts Talking Heads and Madonna to, more recently, LCD Soundsystem and the Rapture.

Aaliyah

Aaliyah (2001)

The turn of the century was a golden age for R&B, as honey-voiced singers teamed up with cutting-edge producers. Aaliyah's third album was the pinnacle. The producers provided the acid bass, fragmented beats and lavish synths, but Aaliyah's glacial presence made her the undisputed star. Her untimely death in 2001 robbed the world of an artist coming into her own.

Abba

The Visitors (1981)

Abba's final studio album followed the gritty breakdown of both the band's marriages, as evidenced on the aching *One of Us* and the gushing *Slipping Through My Fingers*. Yet the title track (a tale of fear and paranoia, layered with ominous synths and an intelligent disco chorus) was a career high. And *Head Over Heels* proved they were still capable of buoyant pop, despite their maudlin mood.

ABC

The Lexicon of Love (1982)

Post-punk was great, sure, but not very sexy. Produced by Trevor Horn, ABC's debut took the pulse of disco and returned the sensual sweep that post-punk had stripped out of it, framing Martin Fry's witty meta-narratives in soaring strings and irresistible funk.

Rabih Abou-Khalil

The Cactus of Knowledge (2000)

Beirut-raised oud player and composer Abou-Khalil vivaciously connects western jazz and classical music with Arab culture. This set sometimes has the jostling heat of a street-market, and sometimes the brassy blare of a Latin-jazz or New Orleans marching band. Antonio Hart's blues-inflected alto sax adds a jazzy edge.

Above the Law

Livin' Like Hustlers (1990)

Years before Jay-Z and Biggie made the hustler a rap archetype, and while NWA's noisy, post-Public Enemy aesthetic was defining a new genre, *Above the Law* showed that gangsterism had a smooth, muscularly musical side. Gangsta rap's world-conquering popularity could not have happened without this pivotal debut.

The Abyssinians

Forward Onto Zion (1976)

Few albums exemplify the contradiction at the heart of roots reggae quite like the Abyssinians' debut (also known as *Satta Massagana*), which collected the vocal trio's early 70s singles. It offered blood-and-fire Rastafarian prophesy detailed via impossibly beguiling vocal harmonies and gorgeous minor-key melodies; the coming apocalypse has rarely sounded so sweet.

AC/DC

Powerage (1978)

The fifth AC/DC studio album marked a crucial change. They lost the boogie, and adopted the 4/4 time that made them stars with *Highway to Hell*. *Powerage* is superior, though: it's lean and spare, and the lyrics are the best of AC/DC's career - innuendo-free portraits of hardnuts and losers.

Acoustic Ladyland

Last Chance Disco (2005)

When Pete Wareham's band chanced upon their (then) unique fusion of rock power, compositional brains and the vocalised squalling of free jazz, they nearly renamed themselves

Last Chance Disco. Fearless and fearsomely well crafted, this is one of a handful of albums that booted jazz into the 21st century.

Across 110th Street

OST (1972)

The blaxploitation story is one of those rickety movies with triumphant soundtracks: take Marvin Gaye's *Trouble Man*, James Brown's *Black Caesar*, or this to-and-fro between jazz composer JJ Johnson and former Sam Cooke protege Bobby Womack. A low-riding tour of 70s Harlem, topped off by the title track's aching ghetto blues.

Adam and the Ants

Kings of the Wild Frontier (1980)

"A new royal family, a wild nobility, we are the family/ I feel beneath the white there is a redskin suffering from centuries of taming." Those were the opening lines to the title track of an album that forced the public to accept that a former small-time punk called Stuart Goddard had a unique pop vision. It was that rare thing: a groundbreaking album that was also hugely successful (it hit No 1 and spent more than a year in the charts), turning Adam Ant into a pop figurehead. While scuffling around the fringes of the music business in the late 70s, Goddard had encountered Malcolm McLaren, and the template for the album emerged. McLaren came up with the idea of basing the sound on hypnotic, surging Burundi drumbeats, and of dressing the singer as a hybrid pirate/Native American. Ant worked the image convincingly enough to persuade fans that they weren't buying a record but an ideology. What they got was theatrical, raucous and unforgettable. The album's three singles - the title track, *Dog Eat Dog* and *Antmusic* - are also its best songs, deliciously combining dual-drummer rhythms that sounded like nothing else in pop. His squeal of "Rock me, daddy-o", incongruously tacked to the end of *Dog Eat Dog*'s chorus, typifies the showmanship that makes the album a personal spotlight for the singer. The message endures, too, where other acts have been forgotten, because Adam and the Ants became the first masters of the great sales tool of the industry in the 80s - the video. Caroline Sullivan

Cannonball Adderley

Somethin' Else (1958)

Art Blakey's drums fizz and crackle, Hank Jones's piano sounds delightfully clanky, and Sam Jones's bass drives the whole thing along. But the real joy is the tension between Julian "Cannonball" Adderley's funky, swaggering alto and Miles Davis's delightfully sluggish trumpet, particularly on that long, loping version of *Autumn Leaves*.

King Sunny Ade and His African Beats

Juju Music (1982)

The first west African album to be heavily promoted in the west, and it's still a classic. King Sunny Ade pioneered the Nigerian big band style known as juju, using talking drums, synths, guitars and even Hawaiian guitar, and mixing traditional Yoruba influences with reggae and dub effects on lengthy, experimental workouts such as *365 Is My Number*.

The Adverts

Crossing the Red Sea With the Adverts (1978)

Although lacking the impact of the Clash or Sex Pistols, the Adverts defined punk's sound with 1977's self-mythologising single, *One Chord Wonders*. Also containing the chart hit *No Time to Be 21*, their debut packs enough snotty-nosed indignation to make anybody long to spit at a policeman.

Christina Aguilera

Stripped (2002)

How to follow a 12m-selling debut album of pristine teen pop? By ditching your manager and your bubblegum image and embracing rebellion, urban sounds and, in particular, sex. Brash, heartfelt

and wonderfully over-the-top, *Stripped* is the sound of one of pop's strongest voices unleashing one of the genre's greatest reinventions.

A-ha

Hunting High And Low (1985)

If Morten Harket hadn't been such a dreamy frontman, the Norwegian trio A-ha might have been taken more seriously at the time (they count Chris Martin and Kanye West among their supporters). Harket's swooping voice borders on the operatic on deathless singles *Take on Me* and *the Sun Always Shines on TV* and beautifully skewed, melancholic pop abounds throughout.

Mahmoud Ahmed

Ethiopes 7 (1999)

Ahmed has been such a pivotal singer on the Addis Ababa scene that it's no surprise he has had three volumes of the fabulous *Ethiopes* series to himself. This is the best: a deeply soulful set from 1975 that smoulders, every time sounding like the discovery of a new musical world.

Air

Moon Safari (1998)

The sound Air forged on their debut album was swiftly diluted by countless other bands (and ad agencies), but none came close to replicating the magic here. Merging hypnotic chill-out with 80s synths and lashings of vocoder, their unique robo-pop vision neared perfection with hit single *Sexy Boy*. A decade on, it still holds up as the thinking person's post-clubbing soundtrack.

Alice Cooper

Killer (1971)

The following year's *School's Out* was the bigger hit but *Killer* packed a harder punch. Alice Cooper was still a band at this point, and their surreal amalgam of glam metal, dark vaudeville and shock-horror imagery came together superbly, while the taboo-busting *Dead Babies* made him Middle America's Marilyn Manson-esque hate figure of the Nixon era.

All Saints

All Saints (1997)

The Saints' first and best album freeze-frames the moment in the late-90s when the foursome were the top girl group, proffering an irresistible mix of London cool and soul-informed pop substance. Stylish originals (*I Know Where It's At*, *Never Ever*) and empathetic covers (*Under the Bridge*, *Lady Marmalade*) made it one of the best pop albums of the era.

Lily Allen

Alright, Still (2006)

Lily Allen's debut takes on all comers with cheeky honesty. Backed by sassy ska, reggae and crunchy soul, Allen picks off cheating exes and wannabe romeos, worries about her spliff-happy brother and proves impossible not to love.

Ellen Allien

Thrills (2005)

On Berlin techno producer Ellen Allien's third album, warm, bubbling analogue synths combine with sub-zero metallic beats for a sound that is intensely physical. Allien says her goal is to turn herself inside out with her music, and that's exactly what *Thrills* feels like: the dancefloor imperative is overwhelming.

Mose Allison

Backcountry Suite (1957)

Mississippi singer/pianist Allison boldly combined bebop piano, Nat "King" Cole and Delta blues with stinging witty social commentary; the Who, the Clash, Bonnie Raitt and Van Morrison are

all fans. Train and One Room Country Shack from this 1957 debut reprise blues legends such as Robert Johnson and Tampa Red.

Amadou & Mariam

Dimanche à Bamako (2005)

West Africa's own Ike and Tina (but with a far healthier home life), this husband-and-wife rhythm and blues pairing from Mali were already huge in France before they added even more sparkle by hiring Manu Chao as producer. A sublimely paced record of pedal-to-the-metal acceleration and relaxed, freewheeling charm.

Tori Amos

Boys For Pele (1996)

Following a string of hit singles, Amos's third album was a dark, spiky, often impenetrable double, with a picture of the artist suckling a piglet on the cover. Remixed by Armand Van Helden, Professional Widow eventually hit big, but the mournful horns of Putting the Damage On are the best place to start.

Laurie Anderson

Big Science (1982)

Performance artist Anderson had a surprise UK hit with O Superman and followed it with one of the weirdest-ever debut albums for a major. Her dry humour, abrasive instrumentation and technological obsessions sound as current as ever: "So hold me Mom, in your long arms. In your petrochemical arms. Your military arms. In your electronic arms."

Vicki Anderson

Mother Popcorn: Anthology (2005)

She was James Brown's favourite soul sister, yet this anthology is the only full-length testament to the fury, fragility and unadulterated funk of Vicky Anderson. Always majestic and rarely bettered, she glides from empowering anthems to the slick 90s sound of Gil Scott-Heron's Home Is Where the Hatred Is.

Aphex Twin

Selected Ambient Works 85-92 (1992)

Mischief-making wunderkind Richard D James materialised from the west country bearing synthesizers of his own devising and a good yarn about writing music in his dreams. Aphex's fragility, eccentricity and sinister beauty drew up a new blueprint for techno that aimed to colonise the brain rather than the dancefloor.

Aphrodite's Child

666 (1971)

Apocalyptic Greek prog rock just doesn't get better than this. Or longer, or more ridiculous. Before Vangelis made Chariots of Fire and Demis Roussos put on a muu-muu and became the world's leading moussaka balladeer, Aphrodite's Child rocked more bombastically than pretty much anyone, ever. An indispensable touchstone of psychedelic high-drama.

AR Kane

69 (1988)

As major-label pop really began to smell putrid, the underground turned on and blissed out. Now unfairly eclipsed by My Bloody Valentine, AR Kane's full-length debut evoked sexual abandon and inner-space exploration though dislocated space funk and faded jangle in songs with titles such as Spermwhale Trip Over. 69 is long overdue serious re-evaluation.

Arcade Fire

Funeral (2004)

Arcade Fire's debut album shot for the stars and frequently, thrillingly, hit them. While the melodramatic vocals, from Win Butler and his wife Regine Chassagne, quiver with anxiety bordering on desperation, the music radiates euphoria. A clattering symphony of guitars, accordion and violin, its energy is relentless and irresistibly uplifting.

Arctic Monkeys

Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not (2006)

Just occasionally, hype is brought on by something genuinely deserving, and so it was with Arctic Monkeys' debut. It marked the arrival of a thrillingly tight punk rock band and, perhaps more importantly, the decade's most talented lyricist, so gifted that some thought he literally couldn't be real: unfounded rumours of a scam briefly abounded.

Neil Ardley

The Greek Variations (1970)

Not as celebrated as Kaleidoscope of Rainbows, nor as rare as the New Jazz Orchestra's Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe, Ardley's through-composed suite shows his skills and boldness as a jazz composer. The score is integrated with improvisations by Ian Carr and Don Rendell, whose small-group work is also featured.

Julian Arguelles

Escapade (1999)

A key member of influential 80s UK big band Loose Tubes, saxophonist Arguelles subsequently blossomed as both a multi-instrumental improviser and a unique composer. Escapade eloquently balances frantic and dolorous themes, crackling improv from guitarist Mike Walker, and Django Bates' skewed-bop tenor-horn lines.

Louis Armstrong

Complete Hot Fives and Hot Sevens (2000)

Begun only eight years after the first jazz was ever recorded, these sensational 1925-1930 improvisations announce jazz's first genius. Armstrong's phrasing, timing and attack on the trumpet liberated solo-based jazz. The unique singing style that made him a global star begins here, too.

Art Ensemble of Chicago

Full Force (1980)

The Art Ensemble reached beyond avant-garde aficionados with its theatricality, eclectic expertise and sense of history. Alongside typical stretches of tone-colour impressionism, almost-straight swing appears here on a Charles Mingus dedication, and trumpeter Lester Bowie thrillingly links free-form and the earliest jazz.

Associates

Sulk (1982)

Associates' third album, which includes the magnificent hit singles Party Fears Two and Club Country, found them competing with the 80s big league on their own terms. Alan Rankine's musical settings are glossy but full of dark corners, and Billy McKenzie's vocal range is astonishing. Unfortunately, Sulk was the last time they worked together.

The Association

Birthday (1968)

While their Californian harmonies were never less than marble-smooth, Birthday was the Association's sonic peak, mixing their chirpiest efforts (Time For Livin', the group's only UK hit) with the death-haunted Barefoot Gentleman and cough-mixture-high Rose Petals Incense and a Kitten.

Virginia Astley

From Gardens Where We Feel Secure (1983)

Astley's ambient meditation on a summer's day in Arcadia is so bucolic it makes Nick Drake sound like Ghostface Killah. Garden gates creak, church bells toll, birds twitter and Astley's piano sparkles like sunlight on the surface of a mill pond. Possibly the most English album ever made.

Arnaldo Atunes, Carlinhos Brown and Marisa Monte

Tribalistas (2002)

This Brazilian supergroup combined three great singers in a massively successful one-off collaboration that produced several of the best Brazilian pop songs of recent years, including the gloriously infectious Ja Sei Namorar. They succeed because of their subtle vocal work and the driving, insistent percussion work of Carlinhos Brown.

The Avalanches

Since I Left You (2000)

It took the Avalanches' six sonic jigsaw puzzlers two years to source, skew and piece together the 900 samples that make up their kaleidoscopic debut. The resultant album matches the technical sophistication of DJ Shadow's Endtroducing with a groovy dancefloor spirit and an infectious sense of fun.

Kevin Ayers

Joy of a Toy (1969)

With his public-school baritone marinated in claret and drowsy, beautifully orchestrated songs, Kevin Ayers' debut established him as a kind of hippy Evelyn Waugh, conjuring up an impossible dream of the late 60s as an endless summer's evening party, at which diaphanously clad girls drifted by and the wine never ran out.

Albert Ayler Trio

Spiritual Unity (1964)

It's sometimes difficult to remember that Ayler is playing a sax on this brutal trio session - you'd sometimes swear he was a heavy metal guitarist, or a Gypsy fiddler. Yet, for all this primal intensity, there's a bluesy, melodic sensibility and an inner calm that makes it a thing of beauty.

Aztec Camera

High Land, Hard Rain (1983)

Before Morrissey became Rough Trade's golden boy, a Scottish teenager made the label a practically perfect debut album. This record is a masterclass in melancholy pop; bright guitars and keyboards darting around sharp and sour vignettes about love, letters and loneliness, with Roddy Frame delivering his stories like a shop-fresh Costello.

Artists beginning with B (part 1)

Saturday November 17, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

The B-52's

The B-52's (1979)

With big hair, big tunes and big voices, the B-52's surreal new wave offered them as a freakbeat take on Devo, with the spiralling Planet Claire (featuring Fred Schneider's unmistakable deadpan bark), the Martian disco of Rock Lobster, and Dance this Mess Around, a girl group parody in which the seeds of riot grl are sewn with Cindy Wilson's scowling shrieks.

Babyface**Tender Lover (1989)**

Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds was, along with musical partner Antonio "LA" Reid, the architect of swingbeat/new jack swing, the late-80s precursor to today's R&B auteurs such as Pharrell and Timbaland. On *Tender Lover*, the singer, writer and producer created an album of sweet modern soul, all slick vocals and sleek electronic funk grooves.

Burt Bacharach**Make It Easy on Yourself (1969)**

The great burst of creativity in which Burt Bacharach and Hal David produced so many imperishable songs was already over when Bacharach released the third in a series of orchestral albums with which he transformed the status of easy-listening music. His own singing on the title track is extraordinarily poignant.

Bad Brains**Banned in DC: Bad Brains' Greatest Riffs (2003)**

In 1979, four black, jazz-obsessed teenagers from Washington DC discovered Sex Pistols and the Clash (and rastafarianism) and, along with Black Flag on other side of the country, inadvertently created an entire youth movement. They were hardcore, but transcended the genre before they even invented it. They never realised their awesome potential, but a legacy was created.

The Bad Plus**Give (2003)**

A piano/bass/drums three-piece reinvented as a heavy rock power trio, the Bad Plus cut their teeth digging deep into harmonically simple pop songs (Blondie, Abba, Nirvana) and finding improvisational gold. Although *Give* sees them rip into Black Sabbath and the Pixies, it also shows their original material has real muscle.

Erykah Badu**Baduizm (1997)**

Of the nu soul divas who emerged in the late-90s, the turban-clad, drawling Badu was the most interesting. An earth mother whose narratives took in hustling, her grandmother and going to Wu-Tang Clan concerts, Badu infused her microdramas with a sultry jazz swing and a wonderful sense of calm amid the madness of life.

Derek Bailey**Ballads (2002)**

After decades of avoiding tunes or recognisable idioms, visionary British improv guitarist Bailey finally made a standards album for John Zorn's label. *My Melancholy Baby*, *Body and Soul*, *Stella By Starlight* and many others get the Bailey treatment of ringing harmonics, flinty back-of-the-bridge pluckings, and spiky, angular runs.

Gato Barbieri**Last Tango in Paris OST (1972)**

Argentine saxophonist Barbieri got the gig of a lifetime in this movie score. The self-destructive lust of the story is amplified, almost dignified by Oliver Nelson's rapturous orchestrations of Barbieri's theme, a set of spiralling modulations that inhabit the film's erotic obsessions.

Syd Barrett**The Madcap Laughs (1970)**

The first of two solo albums (three, counting 1998's out-takes compilation *Opel*) by the founder of Pink Floyd. Barrett was audibly drifting way out there, but just about in possession of his essential

talent, as evidenced by Octopus, the brilliant Dark Globe, and No Good Trying - the latter a surprisingly incisive diagnosis of its author's own predicament.

Basement Jaxx Remedy (1999)

Basement Jaxx's debut is a riot. Felix Buxton and Simon Ratcliffe chuck ragga toasting, Balearic guitars, screeching house divas, salsa rhythms and carnivalesque whoops of joy into a hedonistic melting pot, a sound that encapsulates the best of London in the summer and which gave house music a shot in the arm.

Count Basie

The Complete Decca Recordings (1999) If any sound came to define big band swing before the second world war, it's Count Basie's. This essential Basie material was cut between 1937 and 1939, full of punchy blues themes, uninhibited soloing and irresistibly gliding swing. Countless big bands still hear this exultant music as the source.

Basquiat Strings

With Seb Rochford (2007)

Ben Davis's string quintet use jazz compositional methods to make something special. Their arrangements and originals use stringed instruments as individual, improvising voices, but they retain the massed gorgeousness of a string ensemble. Rochford's drums add a quiet edge and groove, demonstrating that power has nothing to do with volume.

The Beach Boys

The Beach Boys Today! (1965)

The Beach Boys Today! was the ninth album Brian Wilson had produced in three years; three months before its release, the 22-year-old suffered a nervous breakdown. Were it not the precursor of decades of mental illness, it would be tempting to call it the most fortuitous nervous breakdown in rock history. Relieved of his duties as a live performer, he was back in the studio within a fortnight recording the ballads for side two of Today! Romantic, lush and wistful, there was an unmistakable whiff of pot smoke about their uniformly languorous pace and complex, gauzy arrangements: here was the sound of American teen pop inhaling. They are the songs on which Today!'s reputation rests, signposting the way to Pet Sounds, but its overlooked first half is equally fascinating. Wilson was still writing hits to order, but their emotional temperature had changed. The swagger of I Get Around had gone, replaced by something more complex and troubled. The ponderous lyric of When I Grow Up to Be a Man chafes at its irrepressible melody. An early version of Help Me, Rhonda ends by inexplicably fading in and out, undercutting the triumphant chorus with a weird sense of uncertainty. There's something ineffably brittle about the relationship braggadocio of Good to My Baby, while, given what you might tactfully call Wilson's complicated feelings towards his future wife's younger sibling, even the filler of Don't Hurt My Little Sister carries a slightly dark undercurrent. Alexis Petridis

Beastie Boys

Licensed to Ill (1986)

Though they have since downplayed its lyrical excesses, the Beastie Boys' deliciously splenetic debut is still a superb listen. This is because, despite the goofing and gaucheness, Ad Rock, Mike D and MCA were formidably talented vocalists; the subject matter may be a joke, but the raps are deadly serious.

The Beat

I Just Can't Stop It (1980)

Unfairly cast into the shade by the Specials, the blistering debut of Ranking Roger and the gang showed their diet wasn't as ska-dependent as their West Midlands compatriots. Punk and soul also played a part, as did an inclination to take the nation's political temperature on the spiky Stand Down Margaret.

The Beatles

Rubber Soul (1965)

In this album pop begins to morph into rock, and boy-girl simplicities are decisively nudged aside by the kind of candour and ambiguity that define Lennon's Norwegian Wood and Girl, and such McCartney showcases as I'm Looking Through You and You Won't See Me. Best appreciated, needless to say, in tandem with 1966's equally superlative Revolver.

Sidney Bechet

Shake 'Em Up (2000)

By a wilful mixture of a killing technique and unstoppable conviction, firepower and confidence, pioneering saxophonist/clarinetist Bechet reinvented everything he played - even Coltrane was astonished by the precocious modernity of his howling soprano sax. These recordings from 1938 to 1947 roll through typical raunchy blues and classic Dixieland swingers.

Beck

Mellow Gold (1993)

Genre-defying music, clashing and fusing folk, hip-hop and psychedelic rock. Surreal lyrics that reflect on overflowing toilets, Neanderthal neighbours and snooty hippy chicks. Mellow Gold has everything you might find on its more famous follow-up, Odelay, plus lolloping misfit anthem Loser, one of the great pop singles of the 1990s.

Bee Gees

Odessa (1969)

The ornately arranged art of falling apart. While Barry Gibb's songs were rarely more romantic (First of May, Melody Fair), brother Robin was heading way further out; the seven-minute title track is a beguiling, beautiful Crimean war diary entry. Their diverse ambitions led to a two-year split in the Gibb ranks.

Belle and Sebastian

If You're Feeling Sinister (1996)

The second album from Glasgow's B&S crowned the band's songwriting career, its whimsy always tempered by the glower of its lyrics; a blend of S&M, Bible studies and talking dirty for a hobby. With nods to 60s folk, felt and Simon & Garfunkel, this is indie-pop par excellence.

Bellowhead

Burlesque (2006)

The title's the clue. Eleven of folk music's sharpest young blades gather under the big top for a lusty hootenanny of what's probably best described as circus music. Horns parp, fiddles saw and melodeons wheeze, all framing the drama-drenched vocals of ringmaster Jon Boden.

Jorge Ben

Samba Esquema Novo (1963)

Ben's debut album took bossa nova and twisted it for the 60s, creating an intensely rhythmic pop sound. Unlike his explicitly political Tropicalia contemporaries, Ben never went to jail for his music, but his songs and his new style had a bigger impact.

Tim Berne

Science Friction (2002)

A staggering slice of New York fusion in which funky alto saxophonist Berne plays jerky, m-base themes, free-form freakouts and complex chamber jazz while his keyboardist Craig Taborn provides spooky soundscapes that sound like the BBC Radiophonic Workshop's incidental music from Doctor Who. Amazingly, it glues together perfectly.

Chuck Berry**Reelin' and Rockin': The Very Best Of ... (2006)**

Duckwalking his way to infamy, convicted armed robber Chuck Berry was a founding father of rock'n'roll. Though many of the 54 tracks on this double album borrow from his seminal hit, Johnny B Goode, scandal-dogged Berry's risqué humour and groundbreaking guitar remain thrilling. Every song is a lesson in honest, accessible songwriting.

The Beta Band**The Three EPs (1998)**

A splurge of patchwork-pop ideas, and still one of the most satisfying stylistic pile-ups of recent times. Acid-house folk, psychedelic hip-hop, carnivalistic sound-collage ... and, in *Dry the Rain*, an anthem of late-90s indie-bliss balladry. They all but disowned their first "proper" album; later ones were OK, but this is the real gold.

Betty Boo**Boomania (1990)**

By the time she was 20, Londoner Alison Clarkson had written and recorded this strikingly fresh debut, which blends acid house beats, cocksure raps and classic girl group choruses. Even the indie press was smitten, with *Melody Maker* naming her their Completely Faultless Goddess and Pop Genius of the Year.

The Bhundu Boys**The Shed Sessions (2001)**

Electric guitars have never sounded so sweet as they do on this retracing of the all-too-briefly-optimistic sound of young Zimbabwe. Much here was originally aired on their two unimpeachable mid-80s albums, *Shabini* and *Tsvimbodzemoto*, cut at Harare's Shed Studios before the band became something of a major-label novelty act. The music that made John Peel weep.

Big Black**Songs About Fucking (1987)**

Preordained as the valedictory statement of a band drained by its own fury, *Songs About Fucking's* walls of distorted drum machine and siren guitars compel acquiescence to its brutish philosophy, as detailed by chief misanthrope Steve Albini: "Man's gotta hate someone ... And when I'm through with myself, I start on you."

Big Brother and the Holding Company**Cheap Thrills (1968)**

She played as hard as the boys, but Janis Joplin's debut album revealed she was a sensual, ballsy woman on the brink of superstardom. Through eight live and studio tracks - including *Summertime* and her defiant *Piece of My Heart* - Joplin's throat-shredding blues electrifies the band's woozy psychedelic rock.

Big Star**Radio City (1974)**

If Big Star's posthumous legend was made by their fractured third album, the songs to sustain it were to be found on *Radio City*, their second. *September Gurls* alone was enough to inspire a thousand powerpop imitators. The band's leader, Alex Chilton, has more or less disowned it. But what would he know?

Big Youth**Screaming Target (1973)**

He may have treaded heavily in the footsteps of the equally mighty U-Roy, but Manley Buchanan's full-length debut - produced by Gussie Clarke and featuring the sweet vocals of both

Dennis Brown and Gregory Isaacs - stands as the pinnacle of the Jamaican DJ canon, his imaginative toasting a clear blueprint for the as-yet-to-be-born hip-hop nation.

**Bikini Kill
The Singles 1998)**

Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna - along with her bile-filled yelp - spearheaded the riot grrl movement: third wave feminism set to crashing, ineptly played guitars. The Singles showcases the best of their politicised DIY punk from the early 90s; the girl-crush bubblegum rock of Rebel Girl (produced by Joan Jett), the squall of Rah Rah Replica and I Like Fucking.

**The Birthday Party
Prayers on Fire (1981)**

Simultaneously cryptic and feral, Nick Cave's band represented the most violent manifestation of the school of post-punk musical thought that idolised both Iggy Pop and Captain Beefheart. Cave was no balladeer noir here; instead, the pitch-black King Ink and Nick the Stripper bastardised rockabilly with lip-smacking relish.

**Biz Markie
Goin' Off (1988)**

This wasn't the record where Biz changed hip-hop history - that was 1991's I Need a Haircut, which led to the creation of the sample clearance business - but his debut is a delight. Albee Square Mall is an ode to Biz's local shopping precinct, while Pickin' Boogers is a paean to the joys of digital nasal excavation.

**Björk
Debut (1993)**

Shattering indie, pop and electronica into a million glittering pieces in the year of its release, Björk's first solo adventure still blazes with invention, passion and humour. The variety of music here is staggering, from huge, ethereal ballads to club anthems recorded in ladies' loos to harp and woodwind miniatures. Björk's incredible voice stitches the giddy patchwork together.

**Cilla Black
1963-1973: The Abbey Road Decade (1997)**

There's not much subtlety to Cilla Black, but she belted them out with the best. With polished production by George Martin and Lennon & McCartney's It's For You and Step Inside Love as highlights, this triple album of A & B sides has big tunes and a lorra, lorra heart.

**Black Flag
The First Four Years (1983)**

Henry Rollins' persona looms large over the history of Black Flag, but this collects the efforts of the three previous singers who placed the LA band in the American punk pantheon while he was still working in an ice-cream shop. From the scrappy punk of Nervous Breakdown to the untrammelled rage of Jealous Again, this is an essential document of the most important west coast punk band.

**Black Sabbath
Master of Reality (1971)**

By Master of Reality, Black Sabbath had boiled down any lingering blues influences into an intimidating arsenal of zombie riffs. True, there's a token slow ballad with a flute solo, but the album is hallmarked by the stoner sludge-rock of Sweet Leaf and the sci-fi apocalypse of Into the Void, two of their finest moments.

**Black Uhuru
Red (1981)**

After touring with the Police and the Rolling Stones, Black Uhuru became the world's foremost reggae band, but their steps into the leadership vacuum left by Bob Marley faltered after the tragic loss of key singer Puma Jones. Their third album is their peak: roots music, but with tunes anyone can love.

Blackstreet

Blackstreet (1994)

Singer/producer Teddy Riley founded Blackstreet, and at the same time invented the dominant R&B trend of the past decade or so: new jack swing. The band's debut album - the exemplar of Riley's distinctive sound - is absolutely drowning in sex and swing beats, and went platinum in the US without crossover exposure.

Art Blakey

A Night at Birdland, Vol 1 (1954)

This is the first incarnation of Blakey's Jazz Messengers, featuring trumpeter Clifford Brown, altoist Lou Donaldson and pianist Horace Silver. It marked the birth of funky, soulful "hard bop" as we know it, with drummer Blakey playing thrillingly loud throughout, particularly on the rambunctious, definitive version of A Night in Tunisia.

Carla Bley

Escalator Over the Hill (1971)

This "chronotransduction", by Paul Haines and Carla Bley, is a sprawling epic that takes no era and whose cast is drawn from every genre; Don Cherry, Jack Bruce, Gato Barbieri, Linda Rondstat, Viva. Haines's libretto brings a post-beat sensibility, linking world jazz to credible contemporary music theatre - way ahead of its time.

Mary J Blige

Share My World (1997)

Share My World was Blige's return to ghetto fabulous after the darker, autobiographical tinge of its predecessor, My Life. Where My Life was rooted in pain and dripped with loneliness, Share My World was spruced up by new producers (notably Rodney Jerkins), collaborators and songwriters to reflect Blige's positive new frame of mind.

Bloc Party

A Weekend in the City (2006)

It's no surprise Bloc Party listed Bret Easton Ellis's novel Less Than Zero as an inspiration for their sophomore album. For this, too, documents a young man sickened with the excesses of his own generation, yet unable to escape them. A Weekend ... saw the band's ambitious indie soundscapes packing a sizable political punch.

Blondie

Parallel Lines (1978)

Blondie brought pop panache, disco fervour and femme fatale glamour to the New York punk scene - a synthesis that, with their third album, proved so electrifying it made them stars. Parallel Lines still exudes vitality and confidence, crystallised in Debbie Harry's icy vocals, the aggressively catchy guitar hooks and vehement drums.

Blue Ash

No More, No Less (1973)

Peers of Big Star and the Raspberries, Ohio's Blue Ash rejected the then-prevalent prog rock, heavy metal and singer-songwriter navel-gazing in favour of succinct mid-60s influenced, harmony-drenched three-minute nuggets. No More, No Less is a classic of what would later be termed powerpop, even though it remains unreleased on CD.

Blue Magic

The Best Of (1996)

They were the last of the classic symphonic soul groups to emerge out of Philadelphia, forming in 1973, but they were one of the best. With the lead falsetto of Ted "Wizard" Mills, they took male heartache to new heights on hits such as Stop to Start, Spell and the million-selling Sideshow.

The Blue Nile

A Walk Across the Rooftops (1983)

This stunning debut album was an 80s high-water mark - the point where "pale and interesting" got highly creative and musical. Singer Paul Buchanan's languorous vocals recall Sinatra, while the arrangements meld electro and contemporary classical influences into a rich and satisfyingly yearning whole.

Colin Blunstone

One Year (1971)

After the Zombies dissolved, their feathery-voiced frontman Colin Blunstone took a job in insurance, but returned with the autumnal chamber-pop of One Year. Blunstone sounds so delicate that his heart would shatter at the slightest knock, and so decent that he'd apologise for the mess.

Blur

Parklife (1994)

The Noel Gallagher view of history has long damned Parklife as a lightweight postmodern knees-up, all affected estuary vowels and contrived "character" songs. There's something to that. But as postmodern knees-ups go, it's among the very best, and it is actually founded on much more: love, loss, the twentysomething condition and Britain's island psyche, all captured to inspirational effect. Much of the groundwork had been done on 1993's Modern Life Is Rubbish, an album that was set in the affluent demi-monde of Essex and Damon Albarn's adopted home turf of west London, with nods to David Bowie and the Kinks. With Parklife, the same themes were retained, but Blur's palette was radically expanded. On the lead single, Girls and Boys, a madly incongruous euro-disco setting somehow created space for Graham Coxon's scabrous post-punk guitar, an Alex James bassline that was pure Duran Duran, and an Albarn lyric about the carnal wonders of holiday romance that chimed with the arch-hedonism of the New Lad. The result: a Top 5 hit that sounded like the mid-90s incarnate. That, however, was not exactly the point. Parklife - whose working titles included Sport and Soft Porn - was built around beautifully turned, demonstrably non-ironic songs. On Badhead, End of a Century and To the End, you could hear the post-adolescent appetite for endless excess banging up against encroaching maturity, as well as a musical depth that Blur's peers (among them, a freshly arrived troupe from Manchester) could get nowhere near. Best of all was This Is a Low, an evocative fantasia based on the shipping forecast, in which no end of surreal happenings were afoot ("The Queen, she's gone round the bend/ Jumped off Land's End"). Even now, it sounds incredible, almost a match for the creative heights of the Beatles - pulled off when no one yet thought to make the comparison. Parklife inaugurated Blur's imperial phase, that time when, to quote Alex James: "Everyone thinks you're the future and all the other bands are going, 'Shit - how did they do that?'" Its follow-up, The Great Escape, was described by one of their associates as "Parklife without the soul, or the intellect, or the balls". This album, however, still stands up: full of geneses and revelations, by a band on the cusp of life-changing success. John Harris

Blurt

The Best of Blurt, Vol 1 (2003)

Blurt have been fronted by puppeteer-turned-eccentric-saxophonist Ted Milton since 1980 - perhaps the epitome of warped genius. His nearly tuneful squawks and lyrics shouted like a newspaper seller are as extraordinarily inspired as his song titles, which include My Mother Was a Friend of an Enemy of the People.

Boards of Canada

Music Has the Right to Children (1998)

Painstakingly conceived by an enigmatic Edinburgh duo, this pastoral electronica sounds nostalgic but also new and outlandish. Inspired by the Canadian documentaries, it is full of chattering voices, haunting melodies and is densely atmospheric. A direct influence on Radiohead's Kid A.

Curt Boettcher

Misty Mirage (2000)

A player in Millennium, Sagittarius and other delicious soft-pop obscurities collectors love to coo over, Boettcher's solo work was belatedly released on this generous compilation. His ethereal choirboy vocal and lavish arrangements are often so sweet they're almost avant garde. The song title Astral Cowboy just about sums it up.

Dock Boggs

Complete Early Recordings (1997)

The only extant early photograph of Dock Boggs captures him smartly attired in city dress - a man unwilling ever to be thought of as a "hillbilly". The same individuality screams from his recordings, his minimal banjo playing and miserable narratives reaching beyond his Appalachian home to achieve a universal solemnity.

Stefano Bollani

Piano Solo (2006)

In Italian pianist Bollani, the likes of Keith Jarrett, Chick Corea, Bill Evans, and free-improv are referenced as Bollani pays sometimes serious and sometimes hilarious attention to his classical music past. A ferociously brilliant technician, Bollani explores standards, ballads, the Beach Boys, Scott Joplin, Prokofiev and more here.

Bon Jovi

Slippery When Wet (1986)

Bon Jovi hired songwriter Desmond Child, put a slick sheen on blue-collar New Jersey rock and sold 20m copies. Jon Bon Jovi provided the eye candy to get a crossover female audience, while You Give Love a Bad Name, Wanted Dead or Alive and Livin' on a Prayer are perfect pop metal.

Bonzo Dog Band

Cornology (1992)

Although hugely affectionate, the Bonzo Dog Band's popular image as Monty Python's musical precursors undersells their achievements. They certainly presaged Python's surreal comedy - indeed, their jokes have weathered the years rather better - but, as this three-CD set reveals, behind the gags they were also brilliant social satirists, expert musical archaeologists and fantastic songwriters.

Boogie Down Productions

Criminal Minded (1987)

Homeless teenager Lawrence "KRS-One" Parker and his social worker, DJ Scott "La Rock" Sterling, created a record full of ambiguous tales of Bronx streetlife, set to invigoratingly sparse beats. Its influence was both musical and cultural, and Scott's subsequent death merely the first of a number of unsolved hip-hop homicides.

Boredoms

Vision Creation Newsun (2001)

The titans of Japanese noise rock at their most coherent, propulsive and just plain joyous. A vast, dense spree of galloping psychedelic ritualism, it's all hyperdrive synths, drum-circle trance and

revelatory laser-guided guitars. Manic and untrammelled, but oddly accessible - here's your space tourism.

David Bowie

Low (1977)

The first of Bowie's three Berlin albums, *Low* is the sound of a legend at ground zero. Side one swells with sharp, metallic pop, Bowie's glam dynamics filtered through the influences of krautrock and Kraftwerk. Side two's extraordinary instrumental panorama, all disembodied voices and dark electronics, is a perfect requiem to the divided city in which it was made.

Billy Bragg

Brewing Up With Billy Bragg (1984)

While Bragg's dutiful politics are of course present (*It Says Here*, *Island of No Return*), *Brewing Up* is an album that should be remembered for its heart-melting moments of romance. The spry *Saturday Boy*, harrowing *The Myth of Trust* and the reverie that is *St Swithin's Day* are perfect modern English folk ballads.

Brandy

Afrodisiac (2004)

Brandy Norwood's fourth album was recorded during troubled times for both the singer (a messy break-up) and her new collaborator, producer Timbaland (a fallow hit-making period), and it shows. The sound is lush but muted and withdrawn. *Afrodisiac* is an understated and underrated work, but at its heart is a deeply honest break-up album.

Artists beginning with B (part 2)

Saturday November 17, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Anthony Braxton

For Alto (1969)

Braxton's scores look like trigonometry and his sound embraces free-noise, warp-speed linear improv, mutated bebop, even a little Cool School airiness. This landmark 1969 set for Braxton's unaccompanied alto sax breaks out from his hero John Coltrane's legacy through influences from jazz, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and serial music.

Michael Brecker

Pilgrimage (2006)

The Last recording from the most influential contemporary saxophonist after John Coltrane - five months after this session he died of leukaemia - with Brad Mehldau, Herbie Hancock and Pat Metheny among the guests. Typically angular, hard-accented Brecker themes, inspired playing and a sensational impromptu collective jam on *Tumbleweed*.

Breeders

Pod (1990)

The Breeders were an indie supergroup in a time that was culturally unsuited to such a thing. Fronted by Throwing Muse Tanya Donnelly and Pixie Kim Deal, the group played fractured narratives and inspired covers - *Happiness Is a Warm Gun* - to join PJ Harvey and riot grrls worldwide in the ranks of top women in rock.

Anne Briggs**A Collection (1971)**

The most unaffected, natural folk singer Britain has ever produced. Much of A Collection is a cappella, but Briggs - who first unearthed the Bert Jansch/Led Zeppelin standard Blackwaterside - infuses some of Albion's oldest songs (Young Tambling, The Snow It Melts the Soonest) with pure, hypnotic beauty.

Broadcast**Ha Ha Sound (2003)**

Broadcast blend pastoral 60s psychedelia with 21st-century urban electronica to create a graceful, dreamy sound evocative of rolling green hills and scudding skies. Heightening the mood of stately Britishness is Trish Keenan's voice, wispy and cut-glass pure, especially on Ominous Clouds, a hymn to escapism for lost souls everywhere.

The Broken Family Band**Welcome Home, Loser (2005)**

A country band from Cambridgeshire? Singing about falling in love with a satanist? Don't be silly. In fact, the Broken Family Band are national treasures, and beneath the very black humour (it was released on Valentine's Day) there's a sense of life's confusion. John Belushi is a deeply moving reflection on the realisation that drugs and parties do not equate to happiness.

Peter Brotzman**Machine Gun (1968)**

German tenorist Brotzman is part of a fearsome three-sax frontline - completed by theatrical Dutchman Willem Breuker and wry Englishman Evan Parker - who blast out an ear-shredding proto-punk sound that would be cited by every European free-jazzer and noisenik for decades to come. It also remains the coolest use of two drummers, bar Showaddywaddy.

James Brown**Live at the Apollo (1963)**

The best live album ever? In October 1962, Mr Dynamite defied his label to record a show at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, knowing the Famous Flames and the amateur night crowd would be in full cry. There are seven acknowledged wonders of the world. This might be the eighth.

Ruth Brown**The Best Of (1996)**

Ruth Brown married the sophistication of early jazz with the sultriness of blues and the sass of rock'n'roll: no wonder she was the leading female singer in the 50s R&B scene. This Rhino compilation swings in mood from flirty to lovelorn, outraged to carefree, her voice captivating with every turn.

The Dave Brubeck Quartet**Time Out (1959)**

Million-selling instrumental Take Five was on this breakthrough 1959 recording by the composer/pianist who brought classical music's fugues, rondos and irregular time signatures to jazz. Saxophonist Paul Desmond, Take Five's composer and the most inspired improviser in the band, gives the music much of its airy grace.

Jeff Buckley**Grace (1994)**

The only album completed before his death in 1997, Grace is a celebration of Buckley's exquisite vocal talents. Although it feels like a precursor to a more coherent statement, its mix of cover versions of Leonard Cohen and Benjamin Britten alongside self-penned rock numbers adds to its unique atmosphere.

Tim Buckley

Dream Letter: Live in London 1968 (1990)

Buckley père was little more than an afterthought in rock when a sensational live recording emerged in 1990 and catapulted him back into favour. With just a skeletal back-up band, Buckley essays a jazz-folk crossover that's the equal of Astral Weeks, and his dazzling voice soars.

Buena Vista Social Club

Buena Vista Social Club (1997)

A bunch of elderly Cubans were unlikely candidates to displace Portishead as the dinner party soundtrack du jour but, with Ry Cooder's patronage helping the project to claim the column inches, the power and charm of its protagonists ensured theirs was a long-told tale. In sales terms, the world music equivalent of Thriller.

Vashti Bunyan

Lookaftering (2005)

There's comebacks, and then there's Vashti Bunyan. Disappearing from the music world after her 1970 hippy-folk debut Just Another Diamond Day, she re-emerged 35 years later and the lilting melodies, fragile vocals and air of innocence all remained intact. You wouldn't believe a year had passed.

Burial

Burial (2006)

This concept album for a near-future flooded south London set a new gold standard for apocalyptic electronic music. The bass-heavy clamour of metal, static and rain and dark echoes of Joy Division and Massive Attack burned through tracks named after broken homes and prayers, underlining the remarkable power within dubstep's heavy heart.

RD Burman

Sholay OST (1975)

If the plot to the Indian blockbuster Sholay took a lead from Spaghetti westerns, then it was only natural that RD Burman's score opened with Ennio Morricone-inspired harmonicas and flamenco guitars. But the Bollywood musical pioneer didn't stop there: he threw in some western pop influences, a Gypsy dance number and a tribute to Demis Roussos.

Burning Spear

Marcus Garvey (1975)

The album that put the dread into dreadlock, Marcus Garvey is justifiably regarded as the keystone of the roots reggae phenomenon. Jack Ruby's sonar-deep production and the horn-dappled grooves provide elemental ballast for the politicised sermons of Winston Rodney, whose sinuous wail makes communal singalongs out of devout Rasta theology.

The Gary Burton Quartet

Country Roads and Other Places (1968)

Gary Burton, a teenage vibraphone prodigy in the 60s who transformed the instrument's textures and chordal potential, was also one of the early explorers of jazz-rock, particularly with country and classical inflections. Great melodies (some from the young Mike Gibbs), and gracefully punchy playing from a band including drum star Roy Haynes.

Kate Bush

Hounds of Love (1985)

In September 1985, Kate Bush unveiled an album that was astonishing in both its vision and its production. It found inspiration in sources as diverse as Japanese chanting, British horror films and the life of the psychologist Wilhem Reich, the man who invented a "cloudbusting" machine. Bush had been criticised for what some perceived as the wilful obscurity of 1982's The Dreaming,

her first entirely self-produced album and one that was not as commercially successful as her earlier work. This time she retreated to a home studio, again to produce the album herself, exploring sampling and vocal distortion. *Hounds of Love* succeeded in being tremendously experimental and also commercially successful. Those seeking pop were directed towards the first side, the more immediately appealing of the two, featuring *Cloudbusting*, the title song and *Running Up That Hill*. The second side was the experimental one: a song cycle about a woman lost at sea, called *The Ninth Wave*. It took its name from a line in Tennyson's *The Coming of Arthur*, from *Idylls of the King*: at the breaking of the ninth wave, according to Tennyson, King Arthur is delivered to the world. The songs of *The Ninth Wave*, beginning with the woozy *And Dream of Sheep*, grow progressively more intense as Bush explores fear and imagery, culminating in the furious, Celtic track *Jig of Life*. *Hounds of Love* was Bush's masterpiece: it is - daring, compelling and brilliant, and it secured her reputation as one of the most fiercely experimental artists in pop music's history. Laura Barton

Buzzcocks

Singles Going Steady (1979)

No other record of the era epitomises punk's hothouse impact on its best and brightest practitioners. The Buzzcocks realigned the parameters of the love song towards messy realism with these eight singles, plus B-sides. From *Orgasm Addict* to *Something's Gone Wrong Again*, the philosophy is always sardonic, the melodies divine.

The Byrds

The Notorious Byrd Brothers (1968)

Half the band left during the turbulent sessions, but the Byrds' fifth album showcased all their guises: psychedelic stargazers (*Space Odyssey*), hippie rebels (*Draft Morning*), country-rock pioneers (*Change is Now*), and interpreters par excellence (Goffin-King's exquisite *Goin' Back*). From an era when ambitious bands asked themselves "What next?" and answered: "Everything!"

Artists beginning with C (part 1)

Saturday November 17, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Cabaret Voltaire

The Original Sound of Sheffield 83/87 (2001)

The 78/82 companion to this album traces the Cabs' pioneering Burroughs/cut-up experiments in industrial/electronic music, but this traces their equally influential but more accessible dancefloor period. The 12in mixes of their singles are sinister, cold but deliriously sensual electrothrobs a few years ahead of techno.

John Cale

Paris 1919 (1973)

After a series of inconsistent solo albums, the Velvet Underground founder delivered his most lyrical work in Paris. With Cale's love of pop music to the fore, his surreal lyrics - inspired by Graham Greene, Shakespeare and Dylan Thomas - are set here to pastoral acoustic guitars, full band blowouts and some stunning orchestral arrangements.

Camille

Le Fil (2005)

"Le fil" - the thread - refers to the soft drone underpinning the whole album, and most of the sounds you hear are made by Camille Dalmais's voice. It's a neat art-pop conceit, but there's

nothing academic about the puckish pleasure that Camille, sometimes dubbed the French Björk, takes in outwitting these self-imposed restrictions.

Glen Campbell

20 Golden Greats (1976)

The pre-eminent country-pop balladeer, Glen Campbell's smoked hickory tenor voice inhabits these songs so sensitively that every syllable becomes a bigger truth. The Jimmy Webb epics (Galveston, Wichita Lineman) drip existential gravitas, though no less affecting is Rhinestone Cowboy, a bittersweet rumination on the corrosive effects of fame.

Can

Tago Mago (1971)

The essential story: four German musicians convene in Cologne and begin musical experiments that map out a future for rock as transcendent, improvisatory art, while usually avoiding prog-rock indulgence. With the aid of Japanese vocalist Damo Suzuki, their work arguably reached its high point here - though you could just as easily start with 1972's Ege Bamyasi.

Vinicius Cantuaria

Sol Na Cara (1996)

It's only the mid-90s, but New York-based songwriter Cantuaria can see the future of Brazilian music, while looking back to its bossa nova heyday. With the help of Ryuichi Sakamoto, he assembles an exquisite and beautifully tuneful collection, given an elegant, edgy twist by Arto Lindsay's production.

Captain Beefheart

Clear Spot (1973)

By 1973, Beefheart wanted to shed his "freak" image and get a piece of the commercial pie he felt his talent deserved. So he hooked up with producer Ted Templeman and made this swaggering set of funky, soul-infused rock. In fact, Clear Spot failed to chart at all, but it contains some of his finest music.

John Carpenter

Assault On Precinct 13 OST (1976)

To keep to the strict \$100,000 budget, the film director composed the score to this Howard Hawks action thriller homage himself. In the process, he created an early classic of minimalist electronica. Carpenter's sparse main synth refrain, influenced by Led Zeppelin's Immigrant Song, enhanced the atmosphere of menace and dread.

The Carpenters

The Singles 1969-1973 (1973)

One of the biggest-selling albums of the 70s, 1969-1973 was a mainstay of suburban stereos. Today, though, they have lost their reputation for saccharine, middle-of-the-road fare and are rightly revered for their dramatic rereadings (the Beatles' Ticket to Ride), Richard Carpenter's lush arrangements and Karen's breathtakingly melancholy vocals.

James Carr

The Complete Goldwax Records Singles (2001)

That James Carr isn't as celebrated as his contemporary and kindred spirit, Otis Redding, remains one of soul's great mysteries. Fathoms deep and molten with emotion, his voice was never better than on his definitive version of Dark End of the Street, an infidelity classic burning with tragic dignity.

Betty Carter

Droppin' Things (1990)

Betty Carter's merciless reinvention of famous melodies and lyrics could be personal to the verge of enigmatic, but she was an eloquently reflexive improvisatory singer. This fine 1990 session has the empathetic Geri Allen on piano and Freddie Hubbard guesting on trumpet.

Eliza Carthy

Rough Music (2005)

More songs about STDs and capital punishment. Breath in lungfuls of gothic air as the folk world's best-connected offspring delivers her most attractively unvarnished record yet. Includes a melting reading of Billy Bragg's King James Version, far more sublime than its author could ever have imagined.

Martin Carthy with Dave Swarbrick

Byker Hill (1967)

This is the album that transformed the careers of singer/guitarist Martin Carthy and fiddle player Dave Swarbrick, and was rightly regarded as a turning point in the British folk music revival. The duo worked together from 1966-69, reinterpreting traditional songs with brave new arrangements and virtuoso instrumentals - perhaps best heard on the classic title track.

Johnny Cash

At San Quentin (1969)

Now reissued with a DVD of the original Granada documentary about the famous live concert, San Quentin joined Folsom Prison as a classic confirmation of Johnny Cash's outlaw-of-the-people stance. A Boy Named Sue became a novelty hit. Elsewhere, Cash's reading of the situation is exemplary, as he dispenses empathy and humour by turn.

Cat Power

The Greatest (2006)

Leaving her favoured cover versions behind, the softly, huskily sung indie diva Chan Marshall came into her own recording blue-eyed soul with the Memphis Rhythm Band, a group of session legends, on her first completely self-penned album. The liquor-flecked Lived In Bars and languid Love and Communication are nothing less than luscious.

Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus (2004)

Two contrasting albums in one package offer Cave the tender, Nick the pulveriser. With James Johnston and a gospel choir in place of Blixa Bargeld, the Bad Seeds sound all-powerful. Cave is Prometheus, stealing fire from the gods, punished with an endless armageddon and laughing at the absurdity of it all.

Ce'Cile

Bad Gyal (2007)

Amid the brouhaha surrounding homophobic dancehall stars, the genre's best talents have gone sadly overlooked recently. Ce'Cile Charlton is a terrific role model. She is bold, brave and uncompromising; whether deftly, wittily puncturing male egos, shattering taboos or simply getting her groove on, her honeyed tones have a core of steel.

Cee-Lo

Cee-Lo Green Is the Soul Machine (2004)

Between Goodie Mob and Gnarls Barkley, Thomas "Cee-Lo" Callaway made a pair of stunning solo albums. In a world still lapping up OutKast's Speakerboxxx/The Love Below, this should have been huge. But Cee-Lo's wordy introspection, musical experimentation and pop sass was too far ahead of its time.

Central Line

Breaking Point (1982)

Central Line, like their Brit-soul compatriots Hi-Tension and Light of the World, were trying to make slick synth-funk in the vein of Herbie Hancock or Quincy Jones, but anthems such as Walking Into Sunshine constantly betray their Englishness, with a pleasingly punky, clunky brand of funk and a raw dub sensibility.

Chairmen of the Board

Skin I'm In (1974)

A coup of sorts, with frontman General Johnson outflanked by George Clinton's Funkadelic at the record label's behest. A few old-style ballads placated Johnson but the album's blazing heart is a four-part cover of Sly Stone's Life and Death, a futuristic funk-rock monster that anticipates Primal Scream and the Chemical Brothers.

The Chameleons

Script of the Bridge (1983)

Although commercial success eluded this Greater Manchester quartet, their influence stretches from the Verve to Interpol to Coldplay. This timeless debut justifies the fuss with plangent, intertwining guitars and instantly anthemic songs that yearn for childhood innocence and rage powerfully against the world.

Manu Chao

Clandestino (1998)

The solo debut from the biggest world music star in Europe, this album sold nearly 3 million copies and remains his finest achievement. Based in Spain and France, and famous for his travels across Africa and Latin America, Chao created a glorious, slinky global collage with songs such as Welcome to Tijuana, Bongo Bong, and the title track.

The Charlatans

The Charlatans (1995)

Triumph and tragedy at once for the north country boys of Britrock - their finest album, but also the last before the awful loss of keyboardist Rob Collins in a car accident. Here was where they added lashings of groovy, Stones-like soul to their indie-disco shuffle, and came up with some terrific songs full of bright little hooks and tousled, boysy romance.

Ray Charles

Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music (1962)

Widely regarded as the godfather of modern soul, Charles was also adept at incorporating country elements into his music. On this, his best-selling album, he interpreted 12 country standards, from I Can't Stop Loving You to You Are My Sunshine, to thrilling effect, offsetting the syrupy strings with his trademark grit.

Cheap Trick

In Color (1977)

Take two geeks and two hunks from Rockford, Illinois, fuse the tunes of the Beatles and the riffs of Black Sabbath, and you've got In Color, the second album of hard-rocking powerpop from one of Kurt Cobain's favourite bands. They recently re-recorded the whole thing with Steve Albini producing. Then left the new recording on the shelf.

The Chemical Brothers

Dig Your Own Hole (1997)

With their second album, Tom Rowlands and Ed Simons realised their sound and invented big beat in the process. The ululating Block Rockin' Beats gave them their first No 1; they seduced

the indie crowd with Noel Gallagher and Mercury Rev and raised their game with the nine-minute, bagpipe-laden epic *The Private Psychedelic Reel*.

Neneh Cherry

Raw Like Sushi (1989)

Neneh Cherry's socially conscious and beat-heavy debut heaved with a distinctly British attitude at a time when homegrown R&B and rap were largely viewed with suspicion. It's a shame that Cherry is still largely remembered for appearing on *Top of the Pops* while heavily pregnant, rather than for what she was singing.

Chic

Risque (1979)

On their third album, Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, the Lennon and McCartney of the dancefloor, produced disco's Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. Featuring *My Forbidden Lover* and *Good Times*, a critique of recession-hit America disguised as a club classic and one of the most sampled songs ever, *Risque* is a rhythmic, rhapsodic revelation.

The Chi-Lites

A Lonely Man (1972)

Eugene Record's Chicago harmonisers epitomised soul's shift from 60s grit to 70s smoothness; much of their sound was silkily arranged and updated doo-wop. This album runs the genre's gamut from the harmonica-led hit ballad *Oh Girl* to the closing, windswept epic, *The Coldest Days Of My Life*.

The Chills

Heavenly Pop Hits (1994)

Set apart by geography, New Zealand produced a remarkable number of remarkable groups in the 80s. They all signed to the Flying Nun label, they all listened to a lot of 60s music, and their records were full of melancholy beauty. The Chills were the best of the lot, and their *Best Of* is near perfect.

Alex Chilton

Like Flies on Sherbert (1979)

After Big Star disintegrated, Alex Chilton made music only for himself. His first solo album is a record that surely was not made with an eye on sales; it's wracked, cacophonous and chaotic, seemingly as a test of the listener's will. The writer Robert Gordon reckons it is the record truest to the spirit of Memphis.

Charlie Christian

Solo Flight (1993)

The first electric guitar hero and a founder of bebop, Charlie Christian died in 1942 at 25, but these 1939-41 recordings with Benny Goodman's sharp sextet and big band show why he mattered. Christian's pristine tone, harmonic sophistication and swing make these sessions glow very brightly, for all the pre-bop chug of the 1930s dance rhythms.

Lou Christie

Paint America Love (1971)

A teen heartthrob with a couple of hits grows up. But listen closely and you realise Christie's songs always had a hint of weirdness, and not just at the far end of his glorious falsetto croon. The result is a lush, soft-pop masterpiece that flopped and has never yet been properly reissued.

The Church

Heyday (1985)

The paisley-clad Australian guitar band - who are still making fine music today - excelled

themselves with Heyday, one of the pinnacles of 80s psychedelia. Sumptuously produced by Peter Walsh, it comes across like an utopian world-in-song, full of billowing guitars and rich, dreamy melodies .

Gene Clark

Gene Clark With the Gosdin Brothers (1967)

After helping create folk rock with the Byrds, Gene Clark was a man cursed with too many options. A man with pop-star looks but rooted musically in folk and country, Clark covered all the bases with his debut. In one track, So You Say You Lost Your Baby, he created a timeless classic.

The Clash

Clash on Broadway (1991)

The only way to comprehend the Clash's giddy range is to survey their whole career. The best way to do that is with this three-CD set. All the classics are here, but - crucially - so are the experiments, diversions and mistakes that contribute so much to Clash mythology.

Patsy Cline

Showcase (1961)

Marking Cline's move from feisty cowgirl to contemporary pop star, her second album is awash with the string-adorned country of the Nashville Sound and the dulcet tones of the Jordanaires. On the likes of I Fall to Pieces and the peerless Crazy, Cline pours timeless class and tear-stained emotion into every sublime note.

Clipse

Hell Hath No Fury (2006)

Like all great gangsta rap, the Clipse's second album inhabits a kind of ethical no-man's-land. Its protagonists seem unsure whether they are brazenly amoral or deeply troubled by their dexterously told tales of crack-dealing. Producers the Neptunes find the perfect musical accompaniment; sparse, disjointed, bleak and atonal, it's grim and gripping in equal measure.

Clouddead

Clouddead (2001)

The trio of Doseone, Why? and Odd Nosdam, members of the West Coast Anticon hip-hop collective, are unlike anything else that genre has spawned. Their arch, surreal lyrics are delivered in raps that sound like a cartoon version of Cypress Hill over an eclectic and disjunctive mix of beats, drones and samples.

Cluster and Eno

Cluster and Eno (1977)

Eno's other collaborator of 1977, David Bowie, may have reaped the bigger commercial reward, but Eno's work with Dieter Moebius and Hans-Joachim Roedelius was just as good. With its spectral piano pieces, eerie drones, this great ambient LP held a microphone up to nature, to prove that less was more.

Eddie Cochran

The Legendary Masters Series (1989)

More than anyone, Cochran embodied the classic rocker; the perfect quiff, the Gretsch, the sly humour, the implicit menace. Titles such as Ike Weekend, Teenage Heaven, Summertime Blues and Pink Pegged Slacks are 50s, fairground rock 'n' roll in a matchbox.

Cocteau Twins

Heaven or Las Vegas (1990)

It took Cocteau Twins seven albums to climb to their creative peak on this set of other-worldly

pop. Shimmering, multi-layered guitars provided the perfect bed for Liz Fraser's ethereal vocals. Despite band turmoil (Robin Guthrie's drug addiction especially), this became the Scottish trio's biggest UK hit, reaching No 7 in 1990.

Leonard Cohen

I'm Your Man (1988)

The poet laureate of high-maintenance love affairs greeted his sixth decade by embracing synthesizers and geo-politics. From the prophetic terrorist fantasies of *First We Take Manhattan* to the wry self-reflection of *Tower of Song*, his voice was deeper, his humour blacker, and his pen sharper than ever.

Coldcut

Journeys by DJ:70 Minutes of Madness (1995)

In a mid-90s market saturated with DJ mix albums, Coldcut's CD seemed fresh and unique. It still does. A musical sum greater than its parts - which included hip-hop, techno, Harold Budd and Jello Biafra - it came with a dedication to William Burroughs, something absent from, say, *Bonkers Happy Hardcore 2: Now We're Totally Bonkers*.

Coldplay

A Rush of Blood to the Head (2002)

After the winsome acoustic pleasantries of their first album, Chris Martin's indie anthemists comprehensively upped their game for this follow-up. From the moment the album bursts to life with the pounding *Politik*, its songs are bigger, bolder and more affecting than its predecessor's. Coldplay were bedwetters no more.

Lloyd Cole and the Commotions

Rattlesnakes (1984)

Namechecking Simone de Beauvoir and Eva Marie Saint, *Rattlesnakes* drew romantic cultural references into spirited love songs that harked back to the Velvet Underground and Television, but playfully. This album, released when Cole was just 23, contains his finest moments, including *Perfect Skin* and the plaintive, folksy *2CV*.

The Ornette Coleman Quartet

This Is Our Music (1961)

Jazz's pose of super-cool hipsterdom was blown apart at the end of the 50s by the arrival of Ornette Coleman, who replaced a set of musical rules devised to exclude outsiders with his own more generous guidelines. Here, with Don Cherry, Charlie Haden and Ed Blackwell, he explores the expanded range of emotions.

Steve Coleman

Motherland Pulse (1985)

Alto saxophonist and composer Steve Coleman was one of the founders of the 80s m-base movement, a mix of postbop and edgy funk that transformed jazz phrasing and rhythmic thinking, and still does. This was his imposing 1985 debut, with Geri Allen on piano and a young Cassandra Wilson taking the vocals.

Judy Collins

Wildflowers (1967)

Elektra's first lady takes on the best efforts of her contemporaries (Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Jacques Brel) aided by Joshua Rifkin's delicate, parlour-sized arrangements. Yet, most impressively, the best songs are a brace of Collins' own: *Sky Fell* and *Since You Asked* are break-up songs as bleak as they get.

Lyn Collins

Mama Feelgood: The Best of Lyn Collins (2005)

After replacing Vicki Anderson in James Brown's revue, Lyn Collins became the first lady of funk and music's most sampled female vocalist. Powering through Think (About It), purring over Take Me Just As I Am, Collins' huge voice and sultry passion beats the godfather of soul at his own game.

Shirley Collins & Davy Graham

Folk Roots, New Routes (1964)

One of the great fusion experiments of the 60s, matching British and US folk songs against settings that ranged from blues and jazz to North African styles. The exquisite vocals were provided by Shirley Collins, and her songs transformed by the inventive guitar of Davy Graham.

John Coltrane

A Love Supreme (1965)

This famous set became a cult hit for the new audiences for progressive rock when it was released - not that it used electric instruments or a backbeat, but because its chanting, meditational, rhythmic yet timeless feel chimed with the eastern-influenced spiritual pursuits of the era. Coltrane's saxophone sermons, which could last up to an hour, brought the intensity and passion of a kind of manic trance to jazz. The music's traditionally succinct song-based forms had not embraced such possibilities before, and the anguished beauty of Coltrane's music conferred a kind of jazz sainthood on him: he is still revered 40 years after his early death. Coltrane had come to the point of this revolutionary recording through the more everyday materials of 1940s R&B and bebop bands, but in the next decade he joined one of the great Miles Davis quintets, and then entered the 60s with Giant Steps - an awesomely virtuosic high-speed chord-chase to the edge of the bebop universe. Between that recording and A Love Supreme, the saxophonist found the ideal partners with which to shake off the formal trappings of bop: pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison and drummer Elvin Jones. Jones had a dark, rumbling, elemental sound that was free yet unerringly focused, while Tyner gave the piano both percussive and choral qualities, and Garrison sometimes sounded like a flamenco guitarist. A Love Supreme is a four-part devotional work, based on little more than repetitive vamp-like hooks. But the spaces opened up by such simple materials are filled by a torrent of individual and collective improvising. The four-note chant of the title song is twisted, stretched and extended to blistering multiphonic variations by Coltrane, and the restless odysseys of Resolution and Pursuance close with the majestic finale of Psalm. It's Coltrane's mission, but the band is truly four spirits joined as one. John Fordham

Comets on Fire

Field Recordings from the Sun (2002)

Let it be known that there are very loud guitars here, and you can pretty much divine the rest from the title. Santa Cruz's psychedelic juggernauts upped the ante for cosmic-rock cacophony, taking the soul-and-fire thud of primitivist rifiers such as Blue Cheer and making it faster, heavier and freer. A wild, refracted joy.

The Commodores

The Very Best Of (1995)

It's sometimes difficult to remember that Lionel Richie's group were as skilled at driving funk as they were at the smooth pop their leader is synonymous with. Easy, Three Times a Lady and Nightshift are present on this excellent collection, but so are early grit-in-the-groove sides such as Brick House and the Machine Gun.

Common

Electric Circus (2002)

Lonnie Rashid Lynn has recently started selling records by curbing his experimental tendencies.

The epic, Hendrix- and Clinton-inspired Electric Circus is his apogee and nadir; the maddest, biggest, best record he has made, and the least popular.

Company

Company 5 (1977)

Guitarist Derek Bailey, the Frank Zappa of unpremeditated music and inspiration to John Zorn, formed Company in the 70s as an annually gathering, constantly changing all-improv ensemble. This is one of its most accessible encounters, including a powerful horn quartet of trumpeter Leo Smith and sax heroes Anthony Braxton, Steve Lacy and Evan Parker.

The Congos

Heart of the Congos (1977)

The sweet voices of Cedric Myton and Roydel Johnson echo in the caverns of Lee Perry's mind. Jamaica's best session band lays down fathoms-deep roots reggae. The oarsmen of the Rasta faithful row on, chanting repatriation. A spiritual experience, with or without the best weed in town.

Ry Cooder

Chicken Skin Music (1976)

The stepping-off point for the guitarist's exploration of music beyond the US, Cooder's engrossing fourth album touches down in Hawaii and at the Mexican border, as well as flicking through the songbooks of both Jim Reeves and Leadbelly. Best moment? Surely Flaco Jiménez's weightless accordion on the trembling version of He'll Have to Go.

Sam Cooke

Night Beat (1963)

A successful sweet-toned gospel singer, Sam Cooke realised he could get more money - and girls - by wading into the burgeoning US pop market. He brought a spiritual intensity to every cute mainstream confection he recorded, but his beautiful voice was never more mesmerising than on this hushed and gracious final album.

John Cooper-Clarke

Snap Crackle and Bop (1980)

The effervescent Snap Crackle and Bop marked the peak of punk poet Cooper-Clarke's idiosyncratic and erratic muse. The riled eye for detail and deadpan delivery of Evidently Chickentown out-Failed Mark E Smith and the nihilistic epic Beasley Street can still bring a tear to the eye of men of a certain age.

Julian Cope

Fried (1984)

Despite a reputation as a document of LSD impairment, encouraged by the cover image of the author naked under a giant tortoise shell, Fried is actually Cope's most coherent crystallisation of Merrye Melodies psychedelia. The eccentric poise is exemplified by Reynard the Fox, a fugue for cor anglais and leather trousers.

Ruth Copeland

Self Portrait (1970)

Durham girl moves to Detroit, records with Parliament, creates batty and bewitching album that encompasses funk, opera, folk, bagpipes and even a crying solo on the Motownesque Music Box. Most intense and quite unique. The singer's current whereabouts are equally mysterious.

The Coral

The Coral (2002)

Looking to Merseyside's maritime heritage for inspiration, these Wirral teenagers produced a debut that was as unusual as anything in British indie rock that year. The album's dual mainstays

were lush harmonies and psychedelically infused jams, but each song was an individual flight of fancy. Sea shanties, rustic Brit-folk, Mersey skiffle - it's all there.

Chick Corea

Light as a Feather (1973)

Albums by ex-Miles Davis sidemen run into triple figures, but this is one of the more surprising; a sincere and affecting rewriting of the Latin jazz rulebook. Bassist Stanley Clark and flautist/saxophonist Joe Farrell solo brilliantly without breaking the spell of Corea's magical compositions. And what tunes!

The Costello Show

King of America (1986)

Before King of America's release, there was music press speculation that Elvis Costello had "lost it". And while King of America may not have the reputation of the early Attractions records, it stands up rather better. His songwriting is melodious as well as mischievous, and in it you can hear the seeds of alt-country.

Cotton Mather

Kontiki (1998)

For a couple of weeks in 1998, some observers thought powerpop might be the sound of now. It wasn't, but it bequeathed us this forgotten gem from Texas. Cotton Mather took the Beatles' Revolver as their template, and stretched it in compelling ways. Had it come out in 1966, you'd never hear the last of it.

Cowboy Junkies

The Trinity Session (1988)

One autumn night in 1987, Cowboy Junkies ensconced themselves in a Toronto church and communed with their version of the Great American Songbook, tying together Hank Williams, Lou Reed, Rodgers and Hart, and Michael Timmins' own lonesome compositions. They emerged at dawn with a classic of after-hours Americana.

Kevin Coyne

Marjory Razorblade (1973)

Kevin Coyne was a singular talent. His vocal delivery was raw and unsettling, but although his songs - often improvised in the studio - largely dealt with society's outsiders and misfits, they were leavened by a warmth and earthy humour. This double album is his masterpiece, a generous serving of English blues.

The Cramps

Off the Bone (1983)

Formed in 1976, these Ohio weirdos combined punk, B-movies and obscure rockabilly, relocating rock's primal howl while casually previewing psychobilly and goth. Culled from records with titles like Gravest Hits, this twang-packing compilation is the one to be seen dead with.

Crass

Stations Of The Crass (1979)

The combination of rudimentary musical skills plus the intensity of their anarchist credo wrapped Crass's records with an intimidating veneer. Those with strong stomachs are rewarded with a scalding social history of Britain on the cusp of Thatcherism. Stations' proto-hardcore blasts have dated surprisingly well, though the live tracks are strictly for true believers.

Crazy Horse

Crazy Horse (1971)

There's a reason why Crazy Horse are doomed to live in the shadow of sometime collaborator

Neil Young - their albums without him are appalling. Their debut is the exception, thanks to Danny Whitten, a heartbreakingly acute chronicler of crumpled romance and also of the drug culture that would kill him within a year.

Cream

Disraeli Gears (1967)

The album that invented hard rock and convinced even more graffiti artists to scrawl "Clapton is God". With Jimi Hendrix rivalling him as top axe hero, Eric Clapton conjured up his most blistering fretwork on classics such as Sunshine of Your Love, while bassist Jack Bruce and drummer Ginger Baker set the standard for every subsequent power trio.

The Creation

Our Music Is Red With Purple Flashes (1998)

Eddie Phillips predated Jimmy Page's trick of taking a violin bow to his guitar, employing it on the Creation's astonishing 1968 single How Does It Feel to Feel. The Creation took distorted R&B to new places in the 60s and became an inspiration to indie bands in the 80s. This is the best of the available compilations.

Artists beginning with C (part 2)

Monday November 19, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Cristina

Sleep It Off (1984)

Harvard graduate and millionaire's wife Cristina Palaci was the great lost pop star of the 80s, an avant-garde hybrid of Debbie Harry, Kurt Weill and Madonna. Her second album bursts at the seams with opulent New York disco, with Cristina's elegantly tuneless vocal telling tales of quicksand lovers, stained sheets and suicide attempts in foreign hotels.

David Crosby

If I Could Only Remember My Name (1971)

The sound of a Laurel Canyon meltdown. Assisted by Neil Young and the Grateful Dead, the cocaine-frazzled former Byrd mourned broken friendships, the death of lover Christine Hinton and the dissipation of the hippie dream, with tender, spooky, often wordless songs that hang in the air like smoke.

Julee Cruise

Floating Into the Night (1990)

Julee Cruise made a cameo in Twin Peaks fronting a bar band, and here her sweet tones meet again with Angelo Badalamenti's lush melodies and David Lynch's vivid lyrics. The results are seductive yet unsettling, particularly the Twin Peaks theme Falling and the eerie Into the Night.

CSS

Cansei De Ser Sexy (2006)

The debut from Sao Paulo's CSS had the kind of qualities you'd expect to find in a lonely hearts listing: attractive; enjoys nights out; good sense of humour. Employing a refreshingly cavalier attitude to genre and style, this album proved CSS were fun, sure, and worth building a relationship with.

Culture Club

Colour By Numbers (1983)

One of the biggest-selling albums of the year, Colour By Numbers was also Culture Club's high-water mark, where their mix of exuberant soul, pop and confrontational sexuality really gelled. A pre-heroin Boy George was in the finest voice of his career, and the likes of Karma Chameleon still sparkle today.

Culture

Two Sevens Clash (1977)

While Bob Marley celebrated 1977's youth culture with Punky Reggae Party, Culture frontman Joseph Hill adopted Marcus Garvey's prediction of chaos when the sevens met. The 1977 apocalypse of the album title never arrived, but Culture's light, melancholy tones, eclectic mix of styles and benchmark reggae songwriting defined the era as powerfully as the Sex Pistols did.

The Cure

Pornography (1982)

From its opening line, "It doesn't matter if we all die," to its last, "I must fight this sickness," Pornography exhibits in unflinching detail a mind singer Robert Smith's - in collapse. Accompanied by majestic, churning guitars and chilling drums, this is gothic melodrama at its most introverted, oppressive and all-encompassing.

Cypress Hill

Cypress Hill (1991)

The debut from Cypress Hill played their Latino heritage and reefer madness against the hard-edged Californian gangsta rap template set down by NWA. The conspicuous violence and smooth funk beats of How I Could Just Kill a Man and Hand On the Pump broke new ground in commercial hip-hop, as did the fact that the record included a song entirely in Spanish.

Holger Czukay

Movies (1980)

The Can founder's second solo album was a pioneering and widely copied adventure in fusing sampling and radio broadcasts with pop and world music. Although light and playful, Czukay's use of sampled voices provided the framework for Byrne and Eno's much darker, politicised My Life in the Bush of Ghosts a year later.

Artists beginning with D

Monday November 19, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

DAF

Gold und Liebe (1981)

The fourth album from the German electro-punk duo was astonishingly predictive of future dance trends; no wonder John Peel called them "the godfathers of techno". Acid house, new beat, electronic body music - it's all in these rubbery, sequencer-driven grooves, seven years ahead of schedule.

Daft Punk

Discovery (2001)

Fans of the crunching techno of their debut, Homework, were delighted to hear that Daft Punk had turned into robots, but surprised to find that they had followed up with an album scored with

pop. Barry Manilow is sampled on Superheroes, while you can hear Buggles in Digital Love and you can play air guitar to Aerodynamic.

Karen Dalton

It's So Hard to Tell Who's Going to Love You the Best (1969)

Armed with a banjo and a voice that was sour, strange and spiritual, Dalton was a fixture on the Greenwich Village folk scene of the 1960s. This is her great debut record from 1969, and contains the bewitching Little Bit of Rain and It Hurts Me Too.

The Damned

Damned Damned Damned (1977)

This was the first full-length British punk album. With the movement's clarion call single, New Rose, at its nervy, sweaty core, it still sounds kinetic and vital. From the breakneck Neat, Neat, Neat to the gothic slur of Feel the Pain, its lyrics are infectiously spiky and caustic, and its feverish riffs remarkably undated.

Miles Davis

Kind of Blue (1959)

There's a moment on this album that is often cited by musicians and fans as the instant when they fell in love with jazz. After the quiet, almost preoccupied ensemble opening of the hook-themed So What, drummer Jimmy Cobb makes a split-second switch from brushes to sticks, Miles hangs a long single note out into empty space for a tantalising moment that seems never to end - and then Cobb sets the rhythm rolling with a shimmering cymbal splash. When Spike Lee said "do the right thing", he could have been talking about the uncanny intuition of Miles Davis. For most of the trumpeter's life, he did the right thing in his music with an astonishing consistency for an improviser. Kind of Blue is one of the best-known and most enduring of all postwar jazz records, still steadily selling almost half a century later, untouched by fashion or passing time. Davis's supergroup includes pianist Bill Evans and saxophonists Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane, and the music has a lyrical spaciness quite unlike the preceding jazz of the 40s and 50s. The contrast between the horn players remains gripping however many times you play this album - Davis's plaintive muted trumpet and subtle manoeuvring around the beat, Adderley's garrulous alto sax, and John Coltrane's spine-tingling tenor, wheeling through thunderous runs from yearning high notes, through dolorous mid-range phrases, down to basement-register honks that make you jump. An album that turned the course of jazz, and turns on new jazz fans still.
John Fordham

De La Soul

3 Feet High and Rising (1989)

Named after a Johnny Cash lyric (from one of the many tunes it samples), this NYC trio's debut espouses humour and harmony via tunes as day-glo bright as the flowers on its cover. Released amid a sea of gangsta rap, it remains one of hip-hop's most progressive, witty and broad-minded albums.

The Decemberists

Her Majesty the Decemberists

The second album from the Oregon folk-pop group proved them to be true American originals, as Colin Meloy matched his unashamedly ambitious lyrical conceits with an unerring ear for melody. No band has written a love song stranger and more eloquent than Red Right Ankle.

Deep Purple

Machine Head (1972)

The epitome of 1970s heavy metal, Deep Purple's best album combines Ian Gillan's tinnitus-inducing vocals, Richie Blackmore's paint-stripping guitar, a band that sounds like a jet engine and various male fantasies about girls, space and trucks. Smoke On the Water's classic grinding riff is still the compulsory first step for anyone learning rock guitar.

Sam Dees

The Show Must Go On (1975)

The Birmingham, Alabama songwriter for everyone from Aretha to Whitney got to make only one album himself. It's centred around two dark, ghetto-soul ballads, Child of the Streets and Troubled Child. But it's the love songs - So Tied Up, Just Out of My Reach - that bring out the tears in his imploring voice.

Def Leppard

Hysteria (1987)

It's a rare band that owes conquering the world to the drummer losing an arm in a car crash. Had Rick Allen's accident not delayed recording while he learned how to drum with one arm, producer Mutt Lange would have been unavailable - as would those choruses that could crush entire civilisations, and guitars polished until they gleamed. The unavoidable rock record of the late 80s.

The Delfonics

La La Means I Love You (1998)

It was with the Delfonics that Thom Bell, the pioneer of symphonic soul, did his greatest work. Influenced by Burt Bacharach, Bell used oboes, horns, cornets and violins to embellish the group's ethereal falsettos and their loverman-subverting expressions of dependency and vulnerability.

Destiny's Child

Survivor (2001)

Destiny's Child were at their peak when Survivor appeared; its first single, Independent Women Part I (which had been the theme to the Charlie's Angels movie), had spent 11 weeks at No 1 in the US, and the title track had reached No 2. The album obligingly sold 663,000 copies in America in its first week, and ended the year with 10m global sales, confirming their status as the world's most successful female group. But the statistics don't convey its impact as a tract for aspiring teenage and twentysomething women. The empowerment message at its core - which counselled body-pride and financial and emotional self-reliance - wasn't the usual "do as I say, not as I do" flannel. Beyoncé Knowles, the whirlwind who was the band's first among equals, embodied it by producing and co-writing the album, as well as frequently singing lead. (Officially, all three members were "lead vocalists".) The reason the message reached as many ears as it did was that it came parcelled up in incredible tunes, starting with the one-two-three knockout of opening tracks: Independent Women, Survivor and Bootylicious. Unapologetically mainstream pop-R&B, the mood is ever upbeat. And in America, it didn't do any harm that many of the tunes were underpinned by traditional values (Fancy, for example, takes a negative view of competitiveness between women, while Nasty Girl wags a disapproving finger at promiscuity), or that the final track is a gospel medley. But you don't have to be a midwestern Christian to appreciate what three ambitious women can do. Caroline Sullivan

Damien Dempsey

Seize the Day (2004)

A burly figure known for his boxing skills, Dempsey is currently the best young singer-songwriter in Ireland. He mixes gutsy ballads with a dash of reggae and even rap in his treatment of life in contemporary Dublin. The best songs here are Celtic Tiger, a bleak analysis of the greed and damage caused by the city's booming economy, and Ghosts of Overdoses, on drugs and the loss of community.

Denim

Back in Denim (1993)

The debut by former Felt frontman Lawrence Hayward's band is the great unheralded album of the 90s. Part hilarious, heartbreaking memoir - like Jonathan Coe's The Rotters' Club set to thumping glam - and part anti-rock manifesto, it remains utterly unique, testament to its creator's peculiar vision and inimitable genius.

Sandy Denny

Sandy (1972)

This was the second solo album that Denny recorded after leaving Fairport Convention, and was notable both for her exquisite, quietly emotional vocals and her increasingly confident, mature songwriting. She wrote eight of the tracks here, including the gently drifting It'll Take a Long Time.

Depeche Mode

Violator (1990)

Eventually selling more than 7m copies, Violator saw four boys from Basildon become world-beaters. A moody but effortless update of their synth-pop sound, it is the band's most coherent album, and spawned the evergreen Enjoy the Silence, which outstripped tracks by Prince and Madonna to become the biggest-selling 12in in the history of the band's US label.

Derek and the Dominoes

Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs (1970)

Fronting a deliberately anonymous supergroup, Clapton's career-defining masterpiece derived from his drug and alcohol problems and his unrequited love for George Harrison's wife, Patti Boyd. Clapton's playing led rock critic Dave Marsh to remark that the guitarist had reached so deeply into himself that hearing this felt like witnessing a murder or a suicide.

Devo

Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo! (1978)

One of the most innovative debuts in American new wave: a jerky, robotic blend of synthesizers and guitars that could be from Planet Zog. The Akron, Ohio oddballs believed that mankind was regressing. Curiously enough, guitar and dance acts are still pilfering gems like Mongoloid and Jocko Homo some 30 years later.

Dexys Midnight Runners

Searching for the Young Soul Rebels (1980)

Britain's greatest soul band was a bunch of lairy Birmingham lads, wearing working clothes and woolly hats, led by Kevin Rowland, a man so confrontational that he stole the master tapes from the label. Their first album, fiery and passionate, celebrated Irish novelists and old soul singers with equal vigour.

Neil Diamond

12 Songs (2005)

Produced by Rick Rubin following his albums with Johnny Cash, this was a timely reminder of the songwriter behind the sequin-wearing, Las Vegas-entombed legend. It's stripped-down, spiritual and surprisingly restrained, yet made Diamond sound more powerful than he had for decades.

Bo Diddley

The Story of Bo Diddley (2006)

Many of Bo Diddley's best songs were built around a single beat - and boy, what a beat. A jittery, shuffling syncopation of blues and African rhythms, it oozed sex and attitude, as did his brazen guitar-playing and outrageously self-promoting lyrics. Listen to this exhaustive compilation and marvel at his immodesty.

Dillinger

CB200 (1976)

Partial to arcane lyrical twists, Dillinger had a style as cavalier as one might expect from a man named by Lee "Scratch" Perry. This masterful example of the reggae DJ's art boasts the hit single Cokane in My Brain, though his random cultural observations suggest that Dillinger's recreational pursuits were strictly herbal in nature.

Dinosaur Jr

You're Living All Over Me (1987)

One of underground rock's great "why the hell not" moments. J Mascis and Lou Barlow here committed the fantastic non sequitur of using their amp-melting hardcore punk training to reclaim the melody, colour and, especially, guitar solos of classic rock. Tunes abound, as do fuzz, velocity and all kinds of forward possibilities for this wacky new "indie rock" thing.

Dion

Born to Be With You (1975)

This is what you would want a "lost classic" to sound like. With a backstory involving teen stardom and heroin, the last thing Dion DiMucci should have needed was to get involved with Phil Spector. In fact, this sedate and moving album is the sound of two elements that were made for each other.

Discharge

Hear Nothing, See Nothing, Say Nothing (1982)

It's the early 80s. Punk's not dead - it just got angrier, faster and obsessed with nuclear war. Inspiring near-religious devotion from punk, metal and hardcore bands from Japan, Scandinavia and South America, this record, a document of the cold war paranoia of British youth, has become nothing less than an article of faith.

The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy

Hypocrisy is the Greatest Luxury (1992)

Michael Franti's preachy, baritone-voiced pronouncements are easy to dismiss now as sounding like extracts from a social sciences module. But when this arty San Francisco outfit's fusion of clanking industrial beats, jazz guitar, thrash metal and militant poetics gel - such as on the particularly stunning Language of Violence - they can work brilliantly.

Dizzee Rascal

Boy in da Corner (2003)

Quick-witted, fire-tongued Dizzee Rascal's debut was a ferocious statement of intent that also stands as a landmark document of British society in the 21st century: a flare sent from the streets to the mainstream, lit by extraordinary production that did nothing less than reinvent pop music.

DJ Shadow

Endtroducing (1996)

A pioneering album made entirely of samples by a kid from suburban California with vinyl-addiction issues. Endtroducing uses snatches of forgotten funk jams, horror movie strings and crashing beats to achieve a disorienting, dreamlike state. You won't find this instrumental hip-hop classic in the bargain bin alongside its source material.

Thomas Dolby

The Flat Earth (1984)

A forgotten classic of weird 80s pop, as the sound of sampling technology collides with a boundless imagination. The Flat Earth's crepuscular blend of synth-pop, jazz and world music twists and turns while Dolby ruminates on mental illness, town planning and, on the sultry Screen Kiss, the fate of 50s Hollywood's blacklisted screenwriters.

Eric Dolphy

Out to Lunch (1964)

On Out To Lunch, the saxophonist/flautist and a band that featured vibist Bobby Hutcherson united two crucial strands in postwar jazz: Ornette Coleman's emerging "New Thing" in free jazz, and Gunther Schuller's classical-influenced "Third Stream" fusions. It's a compelling document that is at once fractured, dissonant, deeply physical and profoundly lyrical.

Fats Domino

The Fats Domino Jukebox (2002)

New Orleans' favourite son helped nudge the effervescent jazz of the 1930s that bit closer to rock'n'roll, in the process inspiring a generation of Jamaican reggae stars. His chummy voice and jaunty boogie-woogie piano beamed such bonhomie that even the break-up songs on this well-chosen compilation are cheerfully feelgood.

Donovan

Sunshine Superman (1966)

Dropping acid on a Stateside trip transformed Britain's Dylan-alike into a psychedelic visionary, three steps ahead of the pack. Guinevere brings sitar to King Arthur's court; Celeste is a majestic drone; The Trip is a self-explanatory rave-up. Mellow Yellow was a jazzier and more rounded sequel, but this album still sounds fresh out of the box.

The Doors

The Doors (1967)

The debut that unleashed the leather-clad, shaman-obsessed Mr Mojo Risin' on an unsuspecting world is a cyclical trip through LA psychedelia and apocalyptic rock'n'roll. The band never sounded as lean, nor Jim Morrison as wildly seductive, again.

Dave Douglas

Charms of the Night Sky (1998)

The past quarter-century has seen the emergence of a more pastoral, reflective approach to improvisation, which some see as a sign of the inevitable shift towards Europe and elsewhere - except that one of the best examples was made by four Americans. The limpid, drummerless title track will melt your heart.

Dr Alimantado

Best Dressed Chicken in Town (1978)

A compilation of early singles that had caught the imagination of British punk rockers - Born for a Purpose is referenced by the Clash, for example - this is a terrific example of the DJ's art. In the bizarre, poultry-themed title track is a wealth of producer Lee "Scratch" Perry's genius.

Dr Dre

The Chronic (1992)

Despite (or perhaps because of) its violence, misogyny and homophobia, Dr Dre's post-NWA debut remains a defining album in music history. The Chronic introduced a host of soon-to-be-huge rappers (notably Snoop Doggy Dogg), established the prominence of the thrilling west coast G-funk sound, and catapulted gangsta rap to the mainstream.

Dr John

Gris Gris (1968)

Dr John's adoption of voodoo mysticism should seem corny and gimmicky, but there's something disquieting about his debut album's stew of rattling percussion, gravelly vocals, female chanting and weird instrumentation. None of the umpteen covers of I Walk On Guilted Splinters can match the original for sheer marrow-chilling menace.

Dr Octagon

Dr Octagonecologist (1995)

Although at least one of its makers has sought to distance himself from it, this attempt to redefine rap's boundaries ended up simply drawing new ones. Former Ultramagnetic MC "Kool" Keith Thornton's acerbic wordplay and Dan "The Automator" Nakamura's idiosyncratic beats (he samples Bartok on the standout Blue Flowers) became a template for "alternative" rap.

Nick Drake

Five Leaves Left (1969)

Released when he was just 20 years old, Drake's debut demonstrated the enormity of his talent with tracks such as *Way to Blue* and *Cello Song*. Infused with a sense of wonder and a lingering melancholy, it serves as a more subdued counterpoint to its follow-up, *Bryter Later*.

The Dramatics

The Best Of (1986)

The Dramatics were Stax's great exponents of male-harmony soul. The contrasting gruff baritone of LJ Reynolds and soaring falsetto of Ron Banks combined to sublime effect on 1972's million-selling *In the Rain*, a tragic-angst classic complete with strings and stormy sound effects.

Dream Syndicate

The Days of Wine and Roses (1982)

LA's "Paisley Underground" is a forgotten pop footnote, but at the time, little was hipper than the west coast's attempt to meld the energy of punk with psychedelia and country. Dream Syndicate were the scene's leaders, and their debut album showed the kids in black leather that guitar solos really could be exciting.

The Drifters

The Definitive Drifters (2003)

More members have passed through their ranks than managers at *Man City*, but from 50s R&B (a big influence on Elvis) through the Brill Building era to their 70s Indian summer (with hits such as *There Goes My First Love*), they remained the premier vocal group.

Duran Duran

Rio (1982)

The sound of pantalooned New Romantics having it large, Rio made its creators household names. And justly so. Its sharply tailored, synth-washed pop, which included the definitive hits *Hungry Like the Wolf* and *Save a Prayer*, proved that Duran were more than just a bunch of heavily rouged faces.

The Durutti Column

The Return of the Durutti Column (1978)

Former punk turned avant-garde jazz-classical guitarist Vini Reilly and veteran jazz drummer Bruce Mitchell were one of music's oddest but most inspired couplings. Their Factory debut combines fragility, melancholy, birdsong and electronic effects to produce soundscapes of breathtaking, fragile beauty.

Bob Dylan

Biograph (1985)

Just as the film director Todd Haynes needed six actors to play Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There*, so the only way to come to a proper appreciation of the great troubadour is to put his entire body of work on random shuffle. *Freewheelin'*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blood On the Tracks* are individual masterpieces, each a unified piece of work that speaks most eloquently of its time and place, but none of them tells the whole story. *Biograph*, assembled almost a quarter of a century - after Dylan first entered a recording studio, veers wildly from the Nashville crooner to the college folkie to the rock recluse to the amphetaminated harlequin to the anti-war campaigner to the surrealist poet - and so on, across three CDs that follow no thematic or chronological logic but are all the more stimulating for their very randomness. As Dylan's various selves parade by, we might find ourselves getting closer to an understanding of his insistence that they are not the products of an endless series of "reinventions" but instead all just one self: himself. In 1970, with *Self Portrait*, Dylan created a half-hearted riposte to the bootleggers who had gathered up his studio-floor sweepings and established a market for anything to which he had contributed so much as a single harmonica toot. The 53-track *Biograph* is a more thorough, although still hardly rigorous,

attempt to stitch together many of his best-known recordings - Blowin' in the Wind, It Ain't Me Babe, Mr Tambourine Man, Like a Rolling Stone, Positively 4th Street, Just Like a Woman, Lay Lady Lay etc - with B-sides, alternate takes and material previously familiar only on the black market. No one with any feeling of his work would want to be without Percy's Song, one of his - finest narrative ballads, the gorgeous New York studio version of You're a Big Girl Now, or the incandescent, unstoppable version of Isis ("This is a song about marriage," he spits) recorded in Montreal during the Rolling Thunder tour. It's nowhere near a perfect anthology, by anybody's standards, but a certain unevenness in itself makes the set a more accurate reflection of Dylan's often bemusing career. Biograph is also notable for Cameron Crowe's lengthy sleeve essay and song notes, based on interviews in which Dylan spoke more frankly than ever before. No one who read this booklet properly could have been surprised when, 20 years later, the first volume of Dylan's autobiography turned out to be more stimulating and enlightening than anything ever written about him by an outside observer. His description of pleading with his producer, Tom Wilson, to abandon the tendentious title of Another Side of Bob Dylan in 1964 remains eloquent of his desire not to be packaged or marketed. "I knew I was going to have to take a lot of heat for a title like that," he said. "It seemed like a negation of the past, which in no way was true ... It doesn't matter now." Biograph, you might say, is Bob Dylan not unplugged but unpackaged.

Richard Williams

Artists beginning with E

Monday November 19, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Earl Brutus

Your Majesty We Are Here (1996)

Though it was released at the height of Britpop, this debut from Earl Brutus had more in common with conceptual Britart. The music provided glam-rock thunder, the personnel provided glamour - two guys at the front, just drinking - and the lyrics gave the enterprise a surprising lightness of touch.

Steve Earle

Just an American Boy (2003)

"It is never, ever unpatriotic or un-American to question any-fucking-thing in a democracy." The post-rehab Earle sings the post-9/11 blues at live shows across his homeland. The popular music equivalent of a Michael Moore film, but with more love songs and mandolins.

Earth, Wind & Fire

All 'N All (1977)

Maurice White began his career as a drummer, and his band can sound like one enormous kit, where every crash and beat has its funky place. Songs such as Serpentine Fire and Jupiter run on sheer adrenaline; I'll Write a Song for You is superior schmaltz; and the whole shebang is punctuated beautifully by Milton Nascimento's Brazilian Rhyme.

Echo and the Bunnymen

Ocean Rain (1984)

The Bunnymen never followed their contemporaries Simple Minds and U2 into full-blown stadium rock; this epic orchestral pop collection is as close as they ever wanted to get. The luscious strings, gently brushed drums and tremolo-laden guitars provide the perfect context for Ian McCullough's crooning baritone.

Edan

Beauty and the Beat (2005)

A rapper-producer of prodigious gifts, the Bostonian Edan Portnoy straddles the gap between bedroom genius and the slightly nerdy modes of white B-boy hip-hop creativity. His second LP is barely half an hour long, but it is packed with more and better ideas than most MCs can find to pad out three 74-minute plod-a-thons.

Eek-A-Mouse

Wa-Do-Dem (1981)

Named after a hopeless horse he persisted in betting on, Eek-A-Mouse helped reggae smile again following Bob Marley's death. With its nonsense scat rhymes and tales of romantic misadventure, Wa-Do-Dem is a stunning early example of the dancehall sing-jay's craft: malevolent rhythms leavened by Eek's cheeky "biddy-beng-beng" croon.

801

801 Live (1976)

Formed around the old Roxy Music buddies Brian Eno and Phil Manzanera, 801 promised to be one of the best groups of the 70s, but the original lineup survived for only a few months. Thankfully, their Queen Elizabeth Hall concert was recorded for posterity; it includes dazzling versions of Tomorrow Never Knows and Eno's Baby's On Fire.

808 State

Ex:EI (1991)

Their 1989 single Pacific State had an enormous impact on the development of acid house, techno and ambient. But it was Ex:EI, released at the height of Madchester, that was 808's electronic dance masterpiece, featuring vocal contributions from Björk and Bernard Sumner, and the hands-in-the-air Hacienda classics Cubik and In Yer Face.

Elastica

Elastica (1995)

The taut, knowing punk of Line Up and Connection, the giddy Vaseline, the harmonious clatter of Blue, the chugging new wave of Never Here: with their indelibly catchy debut, Elastica brought a tough, feminine edge to the smug lads' club that was Britpop.

Duke Ellington

At Newport 1956 (1956)

Ellington boldly mixed symphonic colours with the rhythmic punch of a Saturday-night dance band. By the mid-50s, though, this unique composer was out of fashion - until this thrilling live set. Saxophonist Paul Gonsalves' marathon 27-chorus blues solo on Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue is one of jazz music's legendary episodes.

Duke Ellington/Charles Mingus/Max Roach

Money Jungle (1962)

The "triumvirate" of Roach, Mingus and Ellington produced a nervy classic, whose lessons were heeded by Medeski, Martin & Wood three decades later. It's a one-off studio date in which everything came together like a dream: witness the energetic Wig Wise and the beautiful Fleurette Africaine.

Missy 'Misdemeanour' Elliott

Supa Dupa Fly (1997)

In collaboration with the producer Timbaland - whose signature sparse beats defined US urban music at the time - Missy Elliott made one of the most ambitious hip-hop records ever. Part Snoop, part Afrika Bambaataa, the album made Elliott the world's highest-selling female rapper.

Lorraine Ellison

Stay With Me: The Best Of (1995)

This Philadelphia singer's tune Stay With Me Baby has been covered by countless artists. Ellison was a huge influence on Janis Joplin, and this 23-track retrospective shows why: big-lunged, soul-baring rhythm'n'blues the way it was meant to be sung.

Eminem

The Marshall Mathers LP (2000)

One long rant against US hypocrisy, The Marshall Mathers LP saw Eminem taking shots at everyone from Bill Clinton to Britney Spears, while mocking those who held him responsible for corrupting a nation. On the album's masterpiece, Stan, the rapper revealed the tender, tormented side of America's Public Enemy No 1.

En Vogue

Funky Divas (1992)

Reinventing the Motown girl group format for the New Jill Swing era, En Vogue were an unstoppable force during the early 90s. Their weapons were a ton of attitude and some astonishing harmonies, and they wielded them with a flair that inspired a generation of R&B baby-divas.

Brian Eno

Another Green World (1975)

On which Eno the prog-pop misfit passed the baton to Eno the avant-garde strategist. Here, his fragile vocals emerge sporadically out of the rippling, ambient haze. The album emerged two years after he left Roxy Music; it could have been a lifetime.

Brian Eno & David Byrne

My Life in the Bush of Ghosts (1981)

Underloved at the time but hugely cherished since, this album sees Byrne and Eno travel into the heart of darkness, their art-rock fuelled and flavoured by African percussion, Egyptian pop singers and samples of crabby radio DJs and a real-life exorcism. An experiment, but utterly absorbing nonetheless.

Eric B & Rakim

Paid in Full (1987)

Paid in Full is one of hip-hop's most innovative, influential records. Eric B broke new ground with his R&B and soul samples, while Rakim's intricate, intelligent rhymes set standards to which many rappers still aspire. Few argued when in 2005 MTV crowned it the greatest hip-hop album of all time.

ESG

A South Bronx Story (2000)

A compilation that shows how three sisters from the Bronx in the early 80s tried to play slick funk but ended up sounding like a wonky African-American version of Joy Division. With congas. It nevertheless sounded hypnotically brilliant, and set the template for every subsequent strand of mutant disco and punk funk.

Eurythmics

Touch (1983)

Timeless synth-pop from Stewart and Lennox before they became a hoary rock act. They switch effortlessly from the melodrama of Here Comes the Rain Again to the blissful reggae lode of Right By Your Side. Jealousy is defined on Who's That Girl?, where Lennox appears sweet when questioning her lover's fidelity until she threatens, "Tell me!"

Bill Evans Trio

The Complete Village Vanguard Recordings 1961 (2005)

The piano trio is the string quartet of jazz, but it took the pianist Bill Evans, the virtuoso bassist Scott LaFaro (who died in a car crash a fortnight after these New York club recordings) and the drummer Paul Motian to uncover its true potential. Their interplay remains the template.

Gil Evans

The Individualism of Gil Evans (1964)

Jazz's great colourist makes time stand still in his swirling, drifting recasting of Kurt Weill's The Barbara Song, to which the young Wayne Shorter adds the most striking solo of his career, gliding wraith-like between the woodwind, French horns and harp. The rest, notably the Ravel-inspired Las Vegas Tango, is of the same order.

Everly Brothers

In Our Image (1966)

Southern hoodlums with the voices of kissing angels, the Everlys took on and embraced the British beat invasion that threatened to destroy their career. Among the highlights are the violent folk-rocker Leave My Girl Alone, the hard-drinking The Price of Love (a UK No 1), and the deeply bereft It's All Over.

Everything But the Girl

Walking Wounded (1996)

Dance snobs who dismissed EBTG overlooked how deeply the duo understood the capacity of deep house and drum'n'bass for melancholy and dislocation, and the devastating precision of Tracey Thorn's lovelorn lyrics. Music for clubbers wondering where to go when the dancefloor clears.

Cesaria Evora

Cafe Atlantico (1999)

The greatest exponent of morna, the lyrical and exquisitely melancholic style from the Cape Verde islands, Cesaria Evora was already a grandmother by the time she became an international celebrity. Her third album showed off her gently soulful, languid but emotional voice on sad, haunting songs such as Desilusao Dum Amdjer.

Artists beginning with F

Monday November 19, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Faces

A Nod Is As Good As a Wink ... to a Blind Horse (1971)

The phrase "good time rock'n'roll band" could have been devised specifically for Faces. Boozy, deceptively ragged-sounding and of dubious moral character, Faces blurred the boundaries between business and pleasure, and recorded the consequences. The two Ronnies, Lane and Wood, are on form here - though it's Rod Stewart's Stay With Me that remains the high point.

Donald Fagen

The Nightfly (1982)

The solo debut from half of Steely Dan had all the polish, wit and deceptively easy grooves of late-period Dan. One of pop's first fully digital recordings, The Nightfly is a stereo buff's delight, its

songs about postwar optimism (I.G.Y.) and backyard fallout shelters (New Frontier) enhanced by rich detail and immaculate surfaces.

John Fahey

Days Have Gone By (1967)

Cantankerous guitarist, inventor of "American Primitive" and unwitting precursor of new age, Fahey makes innovative use of splicing and sampling. Locomotive sounds blend with his acoustic guitar to create a sparse, meditative atmosphere. A wide-open, pan-American travelogue.

Fairport Convention

Unhalfbricking (1969)

An album that catches true pioneers at their key moment of transition: about to move away from the influence of American singer-songwriters and into the single-handed invention of British folk rock, as evidenced here by the epic A Sailor's Life. Who Knows Where the Time Goes? is the jaw-dropping work of the late Sandy Denny.

Marianne Faithfull

Broken English (1979)

As startling a reinvention as pop has ever produced, Broken English was as much a document of survival as anything else. All trace of the sparrow-voiced 60s dolly bird has been extinguished here; in its place appears a gravel-throated cynic who had lived through drug addiction and infidelity and had harrowing tales to tell.

The Fall

Perverted By Language (1983)

How do you choose one Fall album over another? This album is the maverick Mancunians' career in microcosm, featuring one of Mark E Smith's most satisfyingly complex, arch and spookily gothic prose-poems Garden), a clanking, badly recorded slouch epic (Tempo House), and a slogan-packed would-be terrace anthem (Eat Y'Self Fitter).

Ali Farka Touré

Savane (2006)

Ali Farka Touré, who died in March 2006, was the finest and best-loved African guitarist of his generation. Often described as the godfather of the desert blues, he proved through his hypnotic instrumental work and singing that the blues must have originated from his home country of Mali, where he started out playing traditional instruments such as the lute-like n'goni. Born in Niafunke (where he would later become mayor) on the banks of the Niger river, he moved to the capital, Bamako, and worked at the radio station which then operated the country's only recording studio. With typical confidence, he sent his tapes to France, where he developed a following among the Malian community before establishing a reputation among African fans in Britain in the late 80s. He recorded a series of classic albums, including the Grammy-winning Talking Timbuktu in 1994, but this album, released after his death, is arguably his finest. That's certainly the way he saw it. The album was made when he had returned to music after a lengthy period of farming and performing civic duties. He was concerned that young Malians didn't know enough about traditional music so he assembled a band including instruments such as the njarka fiddle and n'goni, played by the young virtuoso Bassekou Kouyate. On the opening track, Erdi, he showed the link between ancient Mali and contemporary blues by matching traditional styles with harmonica and saxophone. He produced some of the most compelling guitar work of his career on the album's other songs, which mixed blues with Celtic-sounding influences or the sturdy reggae of the title track. Robin Denselow

Fatboy Slim

You've Come a Long Way, Baby (1998)

Norman Cook's second Fatboy Slim album defined the uplifting, breakbeat-driven Big Beat scene. But it was also a fantastic pop record. Few albums have more than one bona fide hit; in Gangster

Tripping, The Rockafeller Skank, Right Here, Right Now and Praise You, this had four real belters.

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

Mustt Mustt (1990)

The greatest exponent of qawwli, the devotional music of the Sufis, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan updated his songs to reach younger audiences, both in his native Pakistan and across the west. On this album, his extraordinary, soulful, rapid-fire improvised singing was backed by guitars as well as tablas and harmonium; Massive Attack rousingly remix the title track.

Faust

The Faust Tapes (1973)

Faust's story beggars belief. In search of the next big thing, Polydor Germany gave them a sizable advance and installed them in a converted schoolhouse in Wümme, where they made some of the most radical music ever, edited here into the sonic equivalent of crazy paving and eventually put out by Virgin Records for 49p.

Felt

Stains On a Decade (2003)

Lawrence Hayward's Felt defined 80s British indie as well as any group. They were tortured by obscurity, yet capable of moments of baroque pop genius - the best of which are gathered on this retrospective. Hayward's chart dreams were probably not helped by his habit of giving his best tunes titles such as Dismantled King Is Off the Throne.

Ibrahim Ferrer

Buenos Hermanos (2003)

Backed by Ry Cooder's dream team - the jazz bassist Cachaito, the surf-rock guitarist Manuel Galbán and the Blind Boys of Alabama on backing vocals - Ferrer's effortlessly soulful voice has never sounded better: crooning the boleros, rolling his Rs on the salsas and making staggering vocal improvisations sound as casual as clearing his throat.

Pedro Luis Ferrer

Rustico (2005)

A true original and eccentric, Pedro Luis Ferrer is a Cuban singer-songwriter who plays the country's small local guitar, the tres. He is backed here by the powerful and intense vocals of his daughter, Lena, on charming and thoughtful songs that range from the surreal to angry social commentary. Translations are thankfully provided.

Bryan Ferry

The Bride Stripped Bare (1978)

After Jerry Hall left him for Mick Jagger, Ferry produced the most emotional music of his career. The Roxy frontman's bleak, contemplative mood fires Sign of the Times and The In Crowd, and makes his third solo set - recorded in wintry Montreux- a rare combination of style, substance and anguish.

Lupe Fiasco

Lupe Fiasco's Food and Liquor (2006)

With rap supposedly going to the dogs, Lupe Fiasco's debut proved that there was plenty still left for the music to explore. Whether mind-melding his inner-city block into a giant toy robot (Daydreamin'), skewering hypocrisy in the so-called "war on terror" (American Terrorist) or telling tales of skateboard kids (Kick, Push), the Chicagoan's complex songwriting has made him stand out.

Fiery Furnaces

Gallowsbird's Bark (2003)

New York siblings Matthew and Eleanor Friedberger concocted that rare wonder: a bloody-minded debut album that sounded like nothing else released in a decade. A volatile cocktail of psychedelia, power-pop and punk, with disjointed lyrics floating like bittersweet cherries, it gets more intoxicating with every listen.

Ella Fitzgerald

Sings the Cole Porter Songbook (1956)

For those moments when life just seems drab, you need Ella's ineffably buoyant readings of Cole Porter's ineffably witty, romantic, naughty lyrics. Her voice is so mellifluous, the swooning, swaying arrangements so poised, that the album wafts sophistication like an expensive perfume. Listening to it feels like cocktail hour, every hour.

The Flaming Lips

The Soft Bulletin (1999)

"I stood up and I said 'Yeah!'" breathed Wayne Coyne on The Spark That Bled - an apposite motto for this vibrant, expansive and fantastically life-affirming set. The sunshine riffs and queasy keyboards were tremendous; the fecund imagination and candid, yearning humanity made it a modern psychedelic classic.

The Flatlanders

More a Legend Than a Band (1990)

A supergroup in reverse, the Flatlanders were the short-lived, pre-fame plaything of Texan country dudes Joe Ely, Butch Hancock and Jimmie Dale Gilmore. Released 19 years after it was recorded in 1971, recording, this is a cheery salute to long-deceased, old-timey styles. Little in country music is as drop-dead gorgeous as the twinkle and twang of Tonight I'm Gonna Go Downtown.

Fleetwood Mac

Rumours (1977)

One of the biggest-selling albums of all time, Rumours captured the sound of a band literally falling out of love with each other: it's a soap opera played out over 40 minutes. But rather than resorting to wracked dissonance, Fleetwood Mac laid bare their lives over guitar pop so shiny, so polished, that one would barely believe they had a care in the world.

The Flying Burrito Brothers

Out of the Blue (1996)

The aim, as explained by Chris Hillman, was simple: "Young guys with long hair playing country music in the group format of the day." The result shook up the west coast in the late 60s, thanks largely to the collaboration between Hillman and Gram Parsons. This retrospective includes their finest songs: Sin City and Christine's Tune.

Celso Fonseca

Natural (2003)

Forget Barry White - there are times when the Brazilians have the edge in late-night seduction music. And Fonseca's effortless skill as a guitarist, producer and songwriter means that his originals (Bom Sinai or Meu Samba Torto) and standards (The Night We Called It a Day) sound just as good in the morning.

Roberto Fonseca

Zamazu (2007)

After paying his dues with the Buena Vista Social Club, the Cuban pianist Roberto Fonseca made

this great world-jazz album. He has a gift for melody, demonstrated in tracks such as Clandestino and El Niejo, plus a virtuosity that can hold its own on any jazz stage in the world.

Forest

Full Circle (1970)

Disciples of the Incredible String Band, this Midlands outfit were more melodically gifted and less scatty. Conjuring up will-o'-the-wisps and Jabberwocky ghosts, songs such as Hawk the Hawker, Graveyard and Bluebell Dance are as close to the songs of Bagpuss as to those of Fairport Convention.

Forever Amber

The Love Cycle (1968)

The songs were written by a vocally challenged lawyer, performed by an amateur Cambridge band he met in a record shop, and recorded in a Hitchin attic. So far, so DIY. But the songs are exquisite, and reside in the same English baroque cottage as the Zombies' Odessey and Oracle.

Four Tops

Reach Out (1967)

The Four Tops were diamonds in the Motown crown. This was their last Holland-Dozier-Holland production and their shiniest moment, spawning the hits Reach Out I'll Be There, Bernadette and Standing in the Shadows of Love. Notable also for Smokey Robinson's galloping Wonderful Baby and a jumpy take on the Monkees' I'm a Believer.

Peter Frampton

Frampton Comes Alive (1976)

A pretty neat encapsulation of the airbrushed radio rock that defined the musical appetites of post-Watergate America, perhaps best digested in combination with Fleetwood Mac's Rumours. As proved by Show Me the Way, the ex-Humble Pie man wasn't a bad songwriter - and any album featuring something called Doobie Wah can't be all bad. There again ...

Franco and OK Jazz

Originalite (1999)

Congolese music dominated African dance styles for three decades, and OK Jazz were the best-known, best-loved band in the country, thanks largely to their guitarist, composer and singer, Franco Luambo Makiadi. These mid-50s recordings, recorded when he was still a teenager, show his mature, driving guitar work on a typically cheerful selection.

Jackson C Frank

Jackson C Frank (1965)

After escaping a fire that killed most of his schoolfriends, the Buffalo-born Frank used his insurance cheque to flee to London, where he recorded his only album. It remains a cornerstone of the 60s Soho folk scene: Carnival and Blues Run the Game are still staples for both Bert Jansch and buskers alike.

Frankie Goes to Hollywood

Welcome to the Pleasuredome (1984)

Frankie's debut hasn't worn well. The high-shine homoerotic electro-pop (produced by Trevor Horn) that once seemed cutting-edge now sounds self-conscious and contrived, and Holly Johnson's yappy vocals grate. But it's worth hearing as a guide to a band who generated enormous controversy for a few giddy months.

Aretha Franklin

Never Loved a Man the Way That I Love You (1967)

The title track gave the down-on-her-luck Franklin a hit; Respect and Do Right Woman - Do Right

Man made her a feminist icon. Her debut for Atlantic oozes sex, but never strays far from her gospel roots, especially on *A Change Is Gonna Come*, a poignant homage to Sam Cooke.

Franz Ferdinand

Franz Ferdinand (2004)

Injecting a welcome dose of snappy pop and Weimar glamour into the post-punk revival, this Scottish four-piece's huge crossover success threw down the gauntlet, challenging indie pretenders to raise their game. The record's feral, wiry basslines, sexually ambiguous lyrics and flirtatious vocals never fail to get pulses racing.

Free

Fire and Water (1970)

Home to *All Right Now*, *Fire and Water* - Free's third album - is a prime cut of dirty, slow-burning UK blues rock. Only just out of their teens, Free cut rock'n'roll loose from psychedelia with hard-edged ballads such as *Heavy Load* and *Oh I Wept*.

The Free Design

Sing for Very Important People (1970)

This New York family band's jazz-sparkled sunshine pop found its natural home in this gorgeous album for children. Bright, sugary harmonies, sprightly flutes and gently skittish drums accompany stories of little cowboys, scarlet trees and bubbles. There are plenty of psychedelic twangs and tics to swing the grown-ups, too.

Von Freeman

Young and Foolish (1977)

The Chicago saxophonist Freeman's extraordinary tone derives from an idiosyncratic mashing of Ornette Coleman, his long-time advocate Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Sonny Rollins and Coleman Hawkins. This set is an example of underrated performers - Freeman and his piano partner, John Young - sounding as good as the biggest stars in the heat of a live jam.

Bill Frisell

Have a Little Faith (1993)

Jazz, folk, classical, pop - like a small-town electrical store, Frisell's landmark album has it all. Made with an unusual jazz quintet that includes Guy Klucevsek's accordion, it's a kind of love letter to American music, with John Hiatt's rolling title track and tunes by Copland, Ives, Foster, Rollins, Dylan and even Madonna.

Fugazi

13 Songs (1990)

In Britain, the Pistols and the Clash begat PiL and Gang of Four; in the US, Minor Threat and Black Flag begat Fugazi. The "post-hardcore" tag is clumsy, but useful: here was a more musically complex, thematically broader strain of boiling-point punk, with a fascinating split-personality playoff between Ian MacKaye's adrenalised anthems and Guy Picciotto's artsy flounce.

Fugees

The Score (1996)

One of the biggest hip-hop albums of the 90s owed its success to a song that was anything but hip-hop. Fugees' more-or-less straight cover of Roberta Flack's *Killing Me Softly* allowed them to reach a crossover audience: with that song in people's minds, the album's pop-leavened rap found a huge and ready fanbase.

The Fugs

The Fugs' First Album (1965)

Not rock or folk, but rather a scabrous, foul-mouthed, unprovoked assault on both, by a gang of dissipated beatniks. Cheerfully unwilling to let the fact that they could hardly play a note impede the important business of upsetting people, the Fugs sound like punk's truest precursors: thrillingly anarchic, iconoclastic and hilarious.

Fun Boy Three

Fun Boy Three (1982)

In which Terry Hall, Lynval Golding and Neville Staples flee the wreckage of the Specials, draft in as backup three good-for-a-laugh girls who can't really sing (called Bananarama), and build a debut album around only percussion, horns and a melancholic slant on Thatcher's Britain. Thoroughly addictive, it sounds even more eccentric now than it did then.

Funkadelic

Maggot Brain (1971)

Mixing hard rock with gospel and soul, James Brown funk jams with Hendrix guitar freak-outs, Funkadelic's music was a kind of post-psychedelic cosmic slop. The title track is a classic showcase for the mind-bending extrapolations of Eddie Hazel, whom bandleader George Clinton ordered to play "like your mamma just died".

Nelly Furtado

Loose(2006)

After the failure of Furtado's folky second album, eyebrows were raised at the news that the clean-cut Canadian popster was working with the super-producer Timbaland on an urban reinvention featuring tracks called Maneater and Promiscuous. Jaws then dropped when people heard it. Very few pop albums are as bold, original and consistent as this.

Billy Fury

The Sound of Fury(1960)

Billy Fury's debut turned the one-time Ronald Wycherley into the British Elvis. The album was written entirely by Fury; its Sun Records sound, aching balladeering and raw blues provided his greatest moment before pop's dreamboat era dulled his fire.

Future Sound of London

Accelerator (1991)

Garry Cobain and Brian Dougans became the Dr Strangelove of ambient techno, subjecting acid pulses and fractured breakbeats to strains of devilish experimentation. Their first, most straightforward album was the most fun. Special kudos for their majestic chill-out anthem, Papua New Guinea.

Artists beginning with G

Monday November 19, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Peter Gabriel

Peter Gabriel 4 (1982)

Although it contains the hit single Shock the Monkey, Gabriel's fourth solo album has been overshadowed by his third, the mega-selling So. But it is a pivotal release, marking his first foray into funky world-music grooves, which he has never explored with more energy than he does here.

Serge Gainsbourg

Comic Strip (1996)

It's possible that there isn't an adult in the western world who hasn't heard at least one song by Serge Gainsbourg. The trouble is, chances are equally high that the song most people have heard is Je T'Aime ... Moi Non Plus, the duet he recorded in 1969 with girlfriend Jane Birkin, an erotic paroxysm that apparently plays in Nigella Lawson's mind every time she turns on the hob. For all its merits - it gave the female orgasm some much-needed press, for a start - Je T'Aime doesn't tell you what made Gainsbourg special, what made him not just an arch provocateur but a peerless pop radical who revolutionised his country's music scene. For that, you need Comic Strip, the pop instalment of a three-CD collection gathering Gainsbourg's forays into jazz and Afro-Cuban music. It draws on the period between 1965 and 1969 when he soaked up US and UK pop influences and transformed them into a quintessentially French sound. Un Poison Violent, C'est Ça l'Amour isn't just a pop song, it's a philosophical tract thrashed out in a cafe frequented by Jean-Paul Sartre. Every facet of Gainsbourg's pop personality shows. There's the cheek of Les Sucettes, delivered so tenderly only those with an intimate knowledge of French would - realise it's about male appendages rather than lollipops. There's the playfulness of Comic Strip, with Brigitte Bardot as a cartoon heroine. Bonnie and Clyde smoulders hypnotically and disdain pours from Requiem Pour un Con. It's the kind of compilation that makes you wonder if the word "genius", applied to such a songwriter, isn't a touch mealy-mouthed. Maddy Costa

Galaxie 500

On Fire (1989)

Though their narcotic drone-rock clearly owed the Velvet Underground a debt, Galaxie 500 had a unique, smouldering way with power. On Fire is a delicate weave of downcast melodies and limpid rhythms. Dean Wareham's hipster wail evinces poetry amid the mundane details of snowstorms and decomposing trees.

Gang of Four

Entertainment! (1979)

An album of cerebral funk- and dub-inflected rock, Entertainment! was the startling debut from this Leeds four-piece, and signalled the shift to post-punk. Andy Gill's slashing guitar style combined with Jon King's hectoring lyrics about love as contract or disease, proving an inspiration for, among others, the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Gang Starr

Step in the Arena (1988)

Penfriends whose first compositions were put together over the phone, Keith "Guru" Elam and Chris "DJ Premier" Martin hit their stride on this second album. With Premier's phenomenal flair for finding melodic but hard-hitting beats and Guru's penchant for lyrical positivity expressed in a rich baritone, Step in the Arena began a run of records that made the duo hip-hop legends.

Jan Garbarek

12 Moons (1993)

In Garbarek's poignant and desolate timbre, with its evocations of wind-blown snowscapes and its quivering cries, there is a unique post-Coltrane saxophone voice. Twelve Moons beautifully balances those atmospherics with explicit references to jazz and folk.

Gastr del Sol

The Serpentine Similar (1993)

Art rock doesn't get much brighter or more accessible than this first outing as Gastr del Sol by the wayward experimental guitarist David Grubbs. The wonky, jagged melodies, the jazz-inflected rhythms and the meandering lyrics call to mind surrealist films in which people tilt and time accelerates: the album is that beguiling and strange.

Mary Gauthier**Filth and Fire** (2002)

After a tough early life that included running away from home, jail and drug problems, Gauthier became one of the most compelling songwriters in America, drawing on her own experience to sing about losers, misfits and those just struggling to survive.

Marvin Gaye**What's Going On** (1970)

Periodically voted the greatest LP of all time, Gaye's masterpiece is a benchmark soul album that transcends the genre. Provoked by the wars and social conflict of the day, the singer's ethereal funk symphonies and anguished vocals carry social, political and environmental messages that continue to resonate.

Genesis**Selling England By the Pound** (1973)

When Peter Gabriel fronted Genesis in gloriously silly fancy-dress, they were the archetypal widdly-widdly prog-rock band with very long songs. Antichrists for anyone with punk fibre, the band's impeccably crafted songs pining for medieval England are a guilty pleasure that must be experienced - if necessary, behind closed curtains.

Genius/GZA**Liquid Swords** (1995)

The best Wu-Tang solo album. RZA's production is on the money, the ready-made kung fu mythology is in full effect, and the rapping is, well, genius - by turns literate and menacing, the rhymes of a "child educator plus head amputator" who flows "like the blood on a murder scene".

Bobbie Gentry**The Delta Sweete** (1968)

An adept painter of musical pictures heavy with nostalgia, this Mississippi native and former Las Vegas showgirl oozed dreamy country-blues laced with a dose of churchy folk. Her southern-belle persona made the breezy, sultry Okolona River Bottom Band, the semi-yawning Mornin' Glory and the swinging Penduli Pendulum all the more intimate.

Get Carter**OST** (1971)

Michael Caine on the train home to Newcastle with revenge on his mind and the hip menace of Roy Budd's theme in his ears: film openings don't get much better. But the likes of Getting Nowhere in a Hurry showed that the jazzman Budd could write a cracking pop song, too.

Stan Getz**Jazz Samba** (1962)

Recorded in a church in Washington, DC, this album introduced Brazilian music to the world, and showed how Stateside jazzmen had truly mastered the bossa nova. Charlie Byrd's guitar provides the hypnotic pulse, but the star is tenor saxophonist Getz, sounding as though he's out to charm every babe on the beach.

Ghostface Killah**Ironman** (1996)

So named, according to his Wu-Tang Clan boss RZA, because he was "now you see him, now you don't", Ghostface Killah assumed more corporeal form on his astonishing solo debut. Building on the Wu's imaginary dramas, but providing a surprisingly candid backstory, it confirmed that behind the theatrics of his flow lay a huge emotional range.

Robin Gibb

Robin's Reign (1969)

His split from the Bee Gees led to talk of short-story writing, painting and musicals. This sombre album is the only evidence of his ambitions, built around epic string arrangements, lyrical Edwardiana and a wheezy drum machine - the first ever on a hit record.

Michael Gibbs

Michael Gibbs (1970)

The Rhodesian composer Mike Gibbs was a reluctant jazz hero. His richly nuanced debut album had an impact that resonated throughout the music, out of all proportion to its sales. Tunes such as Sweet Rain and Family Joy, Oh Boy sound as fresh as ever, with superb performances from an A-list team of British jazzers.

Gilberto Gil

Early Years (2004)

Now Brazil's minister of culture, in the late 60s Gil was jailed as a dangerous musical rebel by the military authorities, before being exiled to England. Many of his greatest songs are from this early Tropicalia era, including the classics Domingo No Parque and Bat Macumba. Also included is his exquisite treatment of Steve Winwood's Can't Find My Way Home, recorded in exile.

Bebel Gilberto

Tanto Tempo (2000)

Gilberto's seductively intimate vocals, added to bossa nova and chilled electronic beats, created a pastel-shaded formula that reverberated through modernist bars and hotels worldwide. What makes Tanto Tempo work is the quality control.

Dana Gillespie

Foolish Seasons (1968)

Wayne Bickerton produced the Flirtations' Nothing But a Heartache and this psych-pop gem in the same month. Thunderous drums, harpsichords and fuzzy guitars embellish a dozen potential hit 45s. A glam/blues rethink in the 70s did her career more good.

Dizzy Gillespie

Cubana Be, Cubana Bop (2000)

After Gillespie helped Charlie Parker launch the 1940s bebop revolution, he built a storming big band to play it - and spliced in the music of Cuba and South America. His stunning trumpet playing and audaciously exhilarating themes here define the postwar sound of modern jazz.

Ginuwine

The Bachelor (1996)

Along with Aaliyah's One in a Million, Ginuwine's debut helped invent modern R&B, thanks to the innovative beats of Timbaland. Smooth and slow, but dramatic and full of surprising rhythms, The Bachelor features the US Top 10 hit Pony, a cover of When Doves Cry and guest vocals from Missy Elliott.

Paul Giovanni & Magnet

The Wicker Man OST (1973)

Robin Hardy's hugely influential cult horror film had a fantastic soundtrack, full of terrifying folk music that was composed, arranged and recorded by Giovanni's impromptu band. Lecherous rabble-rousing drinking songs sway next to eerie jigs and reels, the mood darting wildly between innocence, danger and chilling erotica.

Girls Aloud

The Sound of Girls Aloud: The Greatest Hits (2006)

In 2002, it did not seem likely that Popstars: The Rivals would add much to the sum of human happiness. But someone at Polydor broke the cardinal rule of reality-show pop and took a risk, entrusting the songwriting to a stubbornly maverick crew called Xenomania. The result shredded all expectations. Julie Burchill rightly gasped: "It's as if pop music has been created from scratch all over again, this time perfectly." Thus Xenomania rescued the idea of manufactured girl/boy-group pop from the dry cynicism of Westlife, restoring the labour-of-love principles of Motown's hit factory. On their three albums together since, they have consistently asked how far you can push the sound and shape of pop while still hitting the Top 10. A multi-part romp with the abrupt verse-chorus disconnect of Franz Ferdinand's *Take Me Out?* Try *Biology*. Canteringly synth-skiffle? That would be *Love Machine*. Distorted electro-punk? *Wake Me Up*. But all Xenomania's exertions would be wasted if Girls Aloud were mere trilling ciphers. They don't have the distinct cartoon personae of the Spice Girls, but no matter - they are a unit, a team, a mob. Between Cheryl Cole's quarrelsome candour, Nicola Roberts' forbidding scowl and Sarah Harding's falling-out-of-taxis antics, they radiate an appealing bloody-mindedness. Years from now, when someone wants to know how bold and brilliant mainstream British pop could get in the noughties, play them this. Dorian Lynskey

Egberto Gismonti

Selected Works (2004)

Gismonti is one of those extraordinary characters who fits hardly anywhere, yet is welcomed everywhere - for his fiery, uncompromising piano playing, his extraordinary solo guitar performances and his creative collaborations.

Robert Glasper

In My Element (2007)

Also known for his work with hip-hop heavyweights such as Jay Z, Kanye West, Q-Tip and J Dilla, this Blue Note set sees the Atlanta pianist in full-on jazz mode: subtly funky, deeply meditative and thrillingly inventive, mashing up Radiohead with Herbie Hancock and slyly replicating J Dilla's cut-and-slash production sound acoustically.

Global Communication

76:14 (1994)

The West Country duo Tom Middleton and Mark Pritchard shunned song titles, lest they colour the listener's response. This unfathomably beautiful out-of-time masterpiece, informed equally by Brian Eno, David Sylvian, Detroit techno and the Cocteau Twins, could be a soundtrack to anything or nothing. Two awestruck fans, Pete and Katrina Lawrence, were inspired to found the Big Chill.

The Go! Team

Thunder, Lightning, Strike (2005)

The Go! Team's debut was the vision of Ian Parton, a bedroom boffin obsessed with cop-show themes, retro musicals and early hip-hop. Aided by Ninja's cheerleader-style rapping, the Brighton sextet's debut demanded to be danced to. And, for those of a geekier disposition, each listen harboured a fresh new game of spot-the-sample.

The Go-Betweens

Tallulah (1987)

Every Go-Betweens album is fantastic, but here Robert Forster and Grant McLennan's songwriting partnership attained a perfect balance. McLennan's romanticism and his startling ability to evoke his Australian homeland - both of which are audible on the remarkable *Bye Bye Pride* - are set against Forster's dark, mysterious tales of brooding outsiders and relationship anguish.

Goldfrapp

Black Cherry (2003)

Goldfrapp's second album relocated their Parisian pop and Weimar cabaret to the dancefloor. Tracks such as Train and Strict Machine echo Giorgio Moroder's pioneering electronic disco work with Donna Summer, but replace old-style sensual yearning with sizzling postmodern hymns to kinky sex.

Luiz Gonzaga

Focus: O Essential de Luiz Gonzaga (1999)

Still hailed in Brazil's north-west as the local equivalent of both Elvis and Bob Marley, Gonzaga was a rousing singer-songwriter and accordion player who became a major star across the country in the 40s and 50s. His finest, passionate songs like Asa Branca, included here, dealt with the suffering of his arid homeland.

Ruben Gonzalez

Introducing Ruben Gonzalez (2007)

Ry Cooder, who plucked this octogenarian pianist from retirement to play with the Buena Vista Social Club, described him as "a cross between Thelonious Monk and Felix the Cat". This album shows us a pianist by turns flamboyant, clunky, majestic, dainty, hilarious and capable of moments of exquisite beauty.

The Good, the Bad & the Queen

The Good, the Bad & the Queen (2007)

Damon Albarn, ex-Clash bassist Paul Simonon and much-worshipped Nigerian drummer Tony Allen (plus ex-Verve bloke Simon Tong) evoke the troubled tenor of Britain circa 2007 and the travails of "a stropy little island of mixed-up people". In all, a sobering counterpoint to the garish state-of-the-nation address that was Blur's Parklife.

Benny Goodman

Carnegie Hall, January 16th 1938 (2006)

Goodman was a dance-hall star of the 1930s, and this historic show, which launched concert-hall jazz, sweeps through jazz's 20s and 30s history with the clarinetist's band and some star guests. Count Basie, the saxophonists Lester Young and Johnny Hodges, the vibraphonist Lionel Hampton, the drum firebrand Gene Krupa and Goodman himself are all in stunning form.

Gorillaz

Demon Days (2005)

Fair play to Damon Albarn: who else could have cajoled Shaun Ryder, Dennis Hopper and Ike Turner into contributing to a conceptual cartoon band's second album? More to the point, is there anyone of his generation who could have so capably revived the long-dormant idea of intelligent pop while so gloriously defying a genre straitjacket?

Gotan Project

La Revancha del Tango (2001)

Retrieving tango from the tea-dance set and modernising it for worldwide consumption, the Paris-based trio achieved an astonishing ubiquity with their smooth Spanish-language electronica. Somewhat surprisingly, the frequent use of the music as TV incidental music hasn't diminished its impact.

The Graduate

OST (1967)

Anyone who loves Mike Nichols' classic 1967 rite-of-passage movie must also own the soundtrack. Classic Simon and Garfunkel songs such as Mrs Robinson and The Sound of Silence instantly evoke Anne Bancroft's screen seduction of a young Dustin Hoffman.

Grandaddy

The Sophtware Slump (2000)

The electronically enhanced Americana and millennial unease of Grandaddy's second effort brought OK Computer comparisons, but it's warmer and wryer. The album is rooted in that California where the rural past rubs against the digital future; Jason Lytle meditates with doleful eloquence on rusting air conditioners and alcoholic robots.

Grateful Dead

American Beauty (1970)

Psychedelia had made them. The Grateful Dead would be sustained through the next 30 years, however, by something much earthier. In a policy begun on Workingman's Dead and continued here, the group plugged into folk and country, and found a new, harmonious relationship with their music - and with wider American culture.

Grease

OST (1978)

Forget the 1950s hits by nostalgists Sha Na Na and forget the two genuine stars - Frankies Avalon and Valli. It's the knowing, affectionate pastiches, the zest for life and the enduring feelgood factor that make this soundtrack pop gold. Almost 30 years on, Grease is still the word.

Green On Red

Here Come the Snakes (1989)

Green On Red's frequent implosions didn't help them towards crossover success, but they did give their music a thrilling sense of teetering on the edge of self-destruction. These are some of the greatest unheralded songs in American music: loser anthems soaked in country, rock, blues, booze and trouble.

Guided By Voices

Human Amusements at Hourly Rates: The Best Of (2003)

Guided By Voices' position as totems of lo-fi US indie through the 90s obscures the fact that, when their Who-obsessed leader Robert Pollard wished them to be, they were also the most powerful rock band of the decade. This makes that case compellingly.

Guns N' Roses

Appetite for Destruction (1987)

Guns N' Roses grabbed hair metal by the backcombed roots and gleefully rubbed its face in dirty rock'n'roll. Skulking through LA with a sneer on its face, this debut drips with fear and loathing. It united punks and rockers and introduced grit to the MTV machine.

Trilok Gurtu

20 Years of Talking Tabla (2007)

The percussionist Trilok Gurtu can be a difficult man to pin down: he collaborates with every kind of jazz-world style you can imagine. This two-CD greatest-hits compilation gives a good account of his multiple talents, from 80s fusion to his recent adventures with strings.

Margo Guryan

Take a Picture (1968)

It's a great late-60s story: jazz composer experiences Damascene epiphany while listening to God Only Knows and makes single album of breathy, gorgeous sunshine pop before evaporating back into obscurity. This justifiably cooed-over cult classic is the missing link between Astrud Gilberto and Saint Etienne.

Woody Guthrie

The Very Best of Woody Guthrie, Legend of American Folk Blues (1992)

An inspiration to the young Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, the staunchly leftwing Guthrie travelled across America in the 30s and 40s, writing more than a thousand songs, from This Land Is Your Land to ones of more suffering and hardship such as Dust Pneumonia Blues.

Artists beginning with H (part 1)

Monday November 19, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Merle Haggard

Hag: The Best of Merle Haggard (2006)

He wrote the playful, anti-hippy redneck anthem Okie from Muskogee and was Nixon's favourite country singer. But Merle Haggard became a celebrity (even among hippies) for the tough, no-nonsense style that he developed in jail, and for gutsy songs such as Working Man's Blues and the bittersweet prison lament Sing Me Back Home.

Hall & Oates

Abandoned Luncheonette (1973)

Their second album of acoustic soul came long before their transition to new wave funk-pop, which made Hall & Oates the biggest-selling duo in history. Their best-known song, She's Gone, is the centrepiece of a sequence about romantic disillusion, embellished by mandolins, harps and banjos.

Peter Hammill

Love Songs (1984)

"A desperate attempt at commercial success" is Hammill's tongue-in-cheek assessment of these reworkings of his more accessible and moving songs. But Love Songs is also a reminder of why he is regarded as one of the UK's best songwriters, albeit one whose work habitually dips under the radar, this album included.

Herbie Hancock

Takin' Off (1962)

The genius for catchy hooks that has made the pianist/composer Hancock so widely sampled was already apparent on his debut, particularly in the gossamer Watermelon Man. The monumental swing of Dexter Gordon's tenor sax, Freddie Hubbard's gleaming trumpet sound, Billy Higgins' infectious drum-dance - it's a classic 60s Blue Note session.

Handsome Boy Modeling School

So ... How's Your Girl? (1999)

Take two of hip-hop's quirkiest producers (Dan the Automator from Dr Octagon and Prince Paul from De La Soul), a motley cast of guests (including DJ Shadow, Róisín Murphy and Sean Lennon) and a running joke based on a defunct US sitcom that hardly anyone saw. Result: an irresistible magpie-pop variety show.

Happy Mondays

Bummed (1988)

The work of two drug-addled geniuses - frontman Shaun Ryder and Factory Records' resident producer, Martin Hannett - this second Mondays album bettered most of the Madchester explosion it preceded. Bummed is a record of thrillingly raw white-man funk, built on menacing grooves, surefire pop hooks and Ryder's surreal drawls.

The Harder They Come

OST (1972)

An essential introduction to reggae compiled by Jimmy Cliff, the star of the film. Cliff's own songs, You Can Get It If You Really Want and Many Rivers to Cross, form a rousing backbone, while Desmond Dekker makes a chirruping appearance with 007 (Shanty Town). And Toots and the Maytals are here with their ska gem Pressure Drop.

Tim Hardin

Tim Hardin 2 (1967)

You would be hard pushed to choose between this and Tim Hardin 1: the material was recorded as a batch from 1964-66. Both contain classic songs - perhaps the most emotionally vulnerable ever written by a man - that were hits for others, but were never served better than by Hardin's own fragile croon and his sparse but just-right arrangements.

Françoise Hardy

La Question (1971)

After 10 years in the spotlight, the French chanteuse hooked up with an unknown Brazilian guitarist called Tuca and created the most sensual record in the whole canon. All dark strings, wordless vocals, breaths and whispers, this defines the sound that polite people call "after hours".

Harmonia

Musik von Harmonia (1974)

Babbling, trance-inducing proto-electronica by sometime Neu! man Michael Rother along with Hans-Joachim Roedelius and Dieter Möbius, aka Cluster. Harmonia were fantastically ahead of their time, and much-beloved of Brian Eno, who subsequently collaborated with the trio on Tracks and Traces.

Roy Harper

Stormcock (1971)

Harper was a fixture of the 60s London folk scene, but transcended those roots with this adventurous collection of baroque folk. These four lengthy songs feature Led Zeppelin's guitarist Jimmy Page surreptitiously guesting as S Flavius Mercurius, as well as David Bedford's orchestrations on Harper's finest moment, the epic Me and My Woman.

Richard Harris

Yard Went On Forever (1969)

Harris and Jimmy Webb clearly thought that MacArthur Park wasn't fully extending the envelope. Released the following year, these eight lengthy pieces on disintegrating suburbia, with a failed marriage at their heart, ignore conventional song structures and pop your eyes with their blithe ambition.

PJ Harvey

To Bring You My Love (1995)

Polly Harvey's upbringing was soundtracked by her parents' beloved blues music. Although that influence was implied in 1992's Dry and 1993's Rid of Me, here it truly bursts forth. The ghosts of Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon are in full effect, but this is no work of revivalism: as always, Harvey sounds like only herself.

Donny Hathaway

Everything Is Everything (1970)

This landmark debut was one of the first soul records to comment directly on urban America, and Hathaway's breathtaking mix of classical, gospel and humbling vocals remains the benchmark in troubled soul. He killed himself in 1979, but his legacy still resonates.

Coleman Hawkins

Body and Soul (1996)

Hawkins' 1939 version of Body and Soul remains one of the 20th century's defining performances, an inspirational improvisation that strays from the tune, glides over the chord changes and sows the seeds for bebop. But this 1939-56 compilation has a dozen other tenor sax solos of similarly playful, spontaneous beauty.

Hawkwind

The Space Ritual - Alive (1972)

Space, for Hawkwind, was a conceptually rich place that they accessed via their greasy, heavy rock'n'roll craft. Spiritual cousins of German rockers such as Neu! and Amon Düül, Hawkwind played trance-inducing repetitions - cosmic jams that may be turbulent but will get you there.

Isaac Hayes

Hot Buttered Soul (1969)

Hayes' debut as a recording artist on Stax only happened because the label had to put out albums to avert a cash crisis. With the clock ticking, Hayes gave sweeping, funk-backed orchestrations to four songs - two originals, plus covers of Walk On By and By the Time I Get to Phoenix - and draped his honey-drenched baritone over the top. Expedient? Sure, but brilliant.

Lee Hazlewood

Love and Other Crimes (1968)

The laconic Lee had placed Frank Sinatra's daughter Nancy at the top of the tree. Now he had some serious work to do: Pour Man, The House Song and Wait and See are beautiful and simmering. 1971's Requiem for an Almost Lady was darker, but this album has the better tunes.

Michael Head and the Strands

The Magical World of the Strands (1998)

In which Shack's Michael Head wonders what happened to all his furniture. Even in the depths of heroin addiction, he was a brilliant songwriter and arranger, creating blissful, wistful chamber-pop. The album was bankrolled by a French fan who couldn't bear to see Shack die of bad luck and bad drugs.

Heaven 17

Penthouse & Pavement (1981)

When Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh left the Human League in 1980, no one expected them to deliver this album of crisp, electronic funk. Heaven 17's debut sounded the death knell for dour post-punk and ushered in a bold, bright new era of club-friendly dance pop.

Richard Hell & the Voidoids

Blank Generation (1977)

Richard Hell is often credited with inventing punk's style and ethos with his band Television, but it took several years (and two more bands) before his own songs made it on to an album. His debut with the Voidoids was brash and bratty, but more musically adventurous than anything coming from those who had copied him.

Hello

Keeps Us Off the Streets (1975)

The teenage sound of 70s Wood Green, Hello is glam in excelsis, without any Bowie/Roxy arthouse trimmings. New York Groove, Teenage Revolution and Another School Day are hard, shiny, silvery pop, perfectly of their time. The aural equivalent of the Bell logo.

Jimi Hendrix Experience

Are You Experienced (1967)

Jimi Hendrix's debut record was a seismic jolt of heavy riffing and unabashed blues-driven sexuality. After the cranked-up jazz of *Manic Depression*, the spaced-out spoken-word psychedelia of *Third Stone from the Sun* and the rump-twitching *Fire*, rock'n'roll was never the same.

Bernard Herrmann

Taxi Driver OST (1976)

He had already scored *Citizen Kane*, *Cape Fear* and *Psycho*, so it made sense that he should provide the soundtrack to the best film of the 70s. Stark and sombre, full of his trademark ostinatos and inventive orchestration, it was the last work that the New York composer would complete before his death.

Andrew Hill

Point of Departure (1964)

The Chicago composer and pianist Andrew Hill's originality and personal angle on jazz melody suggest Thelonious Monk, but with wider musical references. This is the most creatively radical of Hill's Blue Note sessions, a fearless exploration of jolting time shifts and searing colours, with Eric Dolphy, Joe Henderson and Tony Williams in the lineup.

Lauryn Hill

The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill (1998)

Hill begins with one of the best opening lines ever: "It's funny how money change a situation." It's a sneer at her erstwhile Fugees bandmates; over the course of *Miseducation*, she leaves them in the dust, blazing her way through a peerless set of songs. The breadth and depth of her talent is breathtaking.

Steve Hillage

Rainbow Dome Musick (1979)

When Hillage was in Gong, the guitarist was the archetypal woolly-hat-wearing, dope-eulogising hippie and punk *bête noire*. However, this 1979 experiment in ambient meditations, sequencers and Tibetan bells was years ahead of its time. Probably the album that invented chillout, it was recognised by Alex Paterson as the crucial influence on the Orb.

The Hold Steady

Separation Sunday (2005)

It is rare to hear an American indie album in thrall to both Thin Lizzy and hip-hop. Craig Finn's tales of Catholicism, bad drugs and worse sex clearly owe as much to rap's urban poetry as to the often-cited Bruce Springsteen, while the band sound as if they're playing for dear life.

Hole

Live Through This (1994)

Hole's second album was a gloriously bold call to arms for a generation of young women. Seething with fury and grungy glamour, its lyrics about beauty queens and anorexic magazines tore pop culture apart, and its riotous guitars and nasty basslines gave extra musical muscle.

Billie Holiday

Lady Day Swings (2002)

A uniquely personal eloquence, built on low volume, subtle nuance and rhythmic intuitions that define cool, is evident in this first triumphant phase of Billie Holiday's stormy career. The meanings of 30s pop songs are hauntingly reinvented, and her partnerships with the sax magician Lester Young and the pianist Teddy Wilson are sublime.

David Holland Quartet

Conference of the Birds (1972)

The former Miles Davis bassist David Holland has long led one of the most innovative of post-bop bands, but this is a restrained masterpiece from the Brit's earlier era, bridging free-jazz and structure. The cutting-edge improvisers, Anthony Braxton and Sam Rivers, interweave on saxophones and flutes, and the drummer, Barry Altschul, is superb.

Artists beginning with H (part 2)

Tuesday November 20, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

The Hollies

For Certain Because (1966)

Entirely written by Clarke, Hicks and Nash, Manchester's most underrated team, this album chimes with 12-strings, confidence and gleeful experimentation. Unlike most of their beat contemporaries, in Nash the group had someone who'd get them out of the boozier and into the jet age. Once he left in 1968, cabaret beckoned.

Buddy Holly

Gold (2006)

These days, 50s rock'n'roll sounds charmingly anachronistic, but there's something weirdly contemporary about Buddy Holly's best recordings, as collected here. That's partly because of their huge influence on the Beatles, but mostly because Holly was simply more sophisticated and innovative than his peers, reshaping rock'n'roll without losing any of its primal power.

David Holmes

Let's Get Killed (1997)

Before he became Steven Soderbergh's favourite soundtrack composer, Belfast DJ David Holmes dropped acid and wandered around Manhattan with a DAT machine, trying not to get his head kicked in. The bustling neo-psychedelia that resulted is New York through the ears of a curious outsider with a head full of movies, old records and drugs.

John Holt

1000 Volts of Holt (1973)

It's easy to think of reggae as a vehicle for social protest, which means it's easy to forget artists like John Holt. The honey-voiced former singer of the Paragons (who first recorded *The Tide Is High*, written by Holt) turned to cover versions with *1000 Volts of Holt*, taking on Billy Joel's *Just the Way You Are*, among others, and making them his own.

John Lee Hooker

Hooker (2006)

A glorious 84-track, four-CD set that chronicles the remarkable history of the Mississippi bluesman who was a major influence on British musicians from the Animals to the Rolling Stones. It covers everything from his early stomping blues boogies, such as *Boogie Chillen*, through to his collaborations with Eric Clapton and Van Morrison.

The House of Love

The House of Love (1988)

If they were a new group now, the House of Love's debut album would sell by the truckload. Guy Chadwick's songwriting combined epic rock with intimate ballads, and Terry Bickers' euphoric and unconstrained guitar-playing set standards for indie bands that remain unmatched.

Howlin' Wolf

The Genuine Article (1997)

One of the originators of the "low-down and dirty" sound, Howlin' Wolf is more accurately described as a force of nature than a mere singer. And with his musical foil, the hotshot guitarist Hubert Sumlin, he cut some of the most vital Chicago Blues of the 50s and 60s.

Keith Hudson

Pick-a-Dub (1974)

In the pantheon of great reggae producers, Keith Hudson is frequently overlooked next to King Tubby and Lee Perry - yet no other dub album can rival Pick-a-Dub's austere sonic qualities. Amid ghostly voices, desolate horns and trapdoor percussion, Hudson's mix-desk manipulation of the Soul Syndicate's rhythmic power is breathlessly exciting.

Hugo Largo

Drum (1987)

Co-produced by Michael Stipe, this New York band's debut conjures unearthly magic from two bass guitars, electric violin and the strange, elastic glory of Mimi Goese's voice. Only Annette Peacock comes close in terms of unsettling otherness. Half whisper, half chant, these songs articulate an inner language in sparse, alien lullabies.

Human Chain

Cashin' In (1988)

Human Chain arrived at a time when jazz was in danger of becoming dull-and-worthy or too-trendy-by-half. This Loose Tubes spin-off, with drummer Steve Arguelles and multi-instrumentalists Stuart Jones and Django Bates, attacks a variety of material with bloody-minded virtuosity and flair.

The Human League

Dare! (1981)

Everything came together for the Human League on Dare! Their late-70s experimentation with electronic music had laid the foundation for an album that was lavish in its use of catchy pop choruses (the most memorable, Don't You Want Me?, sold 1.4m copies as a single) while preserving the innovative edge of their earlier work. An undisputed synth-pop classic.

Hüsker Dü

New Day Rising (1985)

Like hundreds of other records in the mid-80s, New Day Rising opens with American hardcore's signature march-like double-time drumming. But what follows is unlike anything else in mid-80s hardcore punk. A wall of guitar noise emerges in a mesmerising shimmer, as if out of a heat haze. The only lyrics are the album's title, sung in harmony, shouted, screamed. The effect is almost unbearably intense and spellbinding. Hüsker Dü had a reputation as the fastest and most forceful of hardcore bands, but their roots went back further, into music considered verboten under punk's scorched-earth doctrine: songwriters Bob Mould and Grant Hart were Beatles and Byrds fans. New Day Rising saw them merge their hardcore past and their penchant for 60s rock. The album blazes with a gospel-like fervour, the work of a band with a point to prove. The torrential results reflect the amphetamine-fuelled blur in which it was recorded. It's not merely the velocity, but the number of ideas: the title track's frazzled psychedelia, the jaunty swing of Books About UFOs, Celebrated Summer's surges from wistful acoustic lament to full-throated roar. By harnessing the aggression of hardcore to a pop sensibility, New Day Rising would ultimately change the face of American rock music, setting a course that led via the Pixies to Nirvana. Hüsker Dü wouldn't survive to see it. In 1988, they split in appalling circumstances: their manager committed suicide, and Hart, incorrectly diagnosed as HIV positive, had become a heroin addict. Alexis Petridis

Leroy Hutson

Love Oh Love (1973)

After three years as Curtis Mayfield's replacement in the Impressions, Hutson's debut showcased his easy near-falsetto. The music mirrored the cover - Leroy's suede jacket and rollneck suggest gentle intensity and serious intentions. Check the title track and high-atmos instrumental Getting It On for evidence.

Artists beginning with I

Tuesday November 20, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Abdullah Ibrahim

Water from an Ancient Well (1985)

South African pianist-composer Ibrahim made hundred of albums, moving around the world while in exile. But few are as satisfyingly consistent as this one, which blends an Ellingtonian compositional sensibility and dignity with African jazz, movingly played (and with a light touch) by a superb band.

Ice Cube

AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted (1990)

Newly freed from his NWA contract and itching to make his mark, Cube headed to New York to work with Public Enemy's Bomb Squad production team, then on one of hip-hop's hottest streaks. The result was a feral, furious, sometimes ignorant, always wilful and consistently provocative masterpiece of rap rage.

Ice T

Power (1988)

The cover may feature this west coast rapper's then girlfriend wearing a skimpy swimsuit and holding a pump-action rifle, but Power is actually gansta rap at its most enlightened. The former gang member's brutal but articulate rhymes expose the harsh realities of drugs and street crime; it's far more grim than glamorous.

The Impressions

Big Sixteen (1966)

Curtis Mayfield's group slipped from being a quintet to a trio over the five years this flawless comp covers (1961-66), while his songwriting grew from floridly romantic doo-wop (Gypsy Woman, Minstrel and Queen) into civil rights/black consciousness anthems (It's All Right, People Get Ready) without missing a beat.

The Incredible String Band

10,000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion (1967)

They had been lambasted as pot-headed hippy nonsense, but the Incredible String Band's second album found a new audience, won over by its warmth and honesty, its risk-taking and - as evidenced by the heartbreaking First Girl I Loved - an ability to strike an emotional nerve that belied their reputation for flowery excess.

Inner City

Paradise (1989)

Alongside high-school friends Derrick May and Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson originated the Detroit techno sound, and - with Klaxons still in shorts - he mixed it with pop. Paradise yielded three Top 10 hits - including hymns to hedonism Big Fun and Good Life - featuring synthetic strings and Paris Grey's gospel-toned voice.

The Intruders

Cowboys to Girls: The Best Of (1995)

With their slow-drag tempos, the hoarse vocals of Sam Brown and strings-drenched rhythms, the Intruders had a slew of hits in the late 60s/early 70s - such as Cowboys to Girls and (We'll Be) United - produced by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff. These songs put the Sound of Philadelphia on the soul map.

Iron Maiden

The Number of the Beast (1982)

No surprise that Iron Maiden's third album came to define Brit metal. Its songs covered everything that a 13-year-old lad might be interested in: Vikings, Satan, cowboys and Indians, a man awaiting hanging. Oh, and prostitutes. What pubescent boy could resist?

Gregory Isaacs

Night Nurse (1982)

Ironically for the epitome of lovers rock, Gregory Isaacs' strongest suit as a vocalist is actually his modesty: unlike the Simply Red version of its title track, Night Nurse is blessed by an elegant service of the song. The glossy production is of its time, but it never detracts from Isaacs' charm.

The Isley Brothers

3+3 (1973)

Lighter than Sly's Riot and less murky than Funkadelic's Maggot Brain, 3+3 was a groundbreaking fusion of funk and rock. But Ernie Isley's searing guitar solos were given a pop context, making hits of That Lady and their cover of Summer Breeze, and earning the album platinum status.

Artists beginning with J

Tuesday November 20, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

J Dilla

Donuts (2006)

James Yancey recorded Donuts while on dialysis and released it the day he turned 32. Three days later, he was dead, but his swan song shows why he was the hip-hop producer's producer. This dense, urgent, soul-drenched splurge of wild ideas and weird juxtapositions is a final celebration of the music he loved.

Janet Jackson

Control (1987)

Any album that coins the catchphrase "It's Miss Janet if you're nasty", is surely a classic. As a bonus, Control is both the apex of producers Jam & Lewis's irresistible club aesthetic and a fierce, no-nonsense statement of arrival from Miss Janet herself.

Joe Jackson

Look Sharp! (1979)

Look Sharp! seemed to herald the arrival of a serious rival for Elvis Costello's position as New Wave's embittered Mr Grumpy. Packed with jumpy little pop grenades - most barely three minutes long, all wildly catchy - it presented Jackson as a neurotic romantic with a lifetime of relationship failures to get off his chest, and then some.

Michael Jackson

Off the Wall (1979)

The odd thing isn't that Michael Jackson got so messed up, but that he managed to make two of the best ever pop albums beforehand. Off the Wall remains the gold standard for dance pop, and the inspiration behind every former boybander's attempt to cut their own solo career.

Millie Jackson

Caught Up (1974)

Jackson comes off like a female Isaac Hayes on this half-sung, half-rapped song cycle about adultery; she switches her sympathies between the mistress and the betrayed wife. The prolix titles - (If Loving You Is Wrong) I Don't Want to Be Right, I'm Through Trying to Prove My Love to You - say it all.

Walter Jackson

Speak Her Name (1966)

One of Chicago's great "ice man" vocalists along with Jerry Butler and Garland Green, Jackson's rich voice took stoicism to new extremes on It's An Uphill Climb to the Bottom and My One Chance to Make It. Riley Hampton's lush but eerie arrangements suit it perfectly.

Wanda Jackson

Rockin' With Wanda (1960)

Few people could have compared themselves to the atom bomb without sounding crass. But that was Wanda Jackson - a prime mover in the 1950s rockabilly scene, whose ponytail-swinging attitude and twanging guitar remain absurdly underacknowledged (not least by the Rock'n'roll Hall of Fame).

The Jacksons

Triumph (1980)

Produced, arranged and composed entirely by the Jacksons, Triumph followed Michael's Off the Wall by a year - but it was arguably the more consistently brilliant work, with eight mini-masterpieces of symphonic disco, including massive hits Can You Feel It?, Walk Right Now and Lovely One, plus one heart-stopping ballad.

The Jam

Sound Affects (1980)

Their most cutting-edge album, and Paul Weller's favourite - brimming with the angular influence of Wire, Joy Division and XTC, and full of the icy foreboding of the early Thatcher years. Among its highlights are the razor-sharp Start and panoramic That's Entertainment, famously written by Weller in a beery fug.

James

Stutter (1986)

Before Madchester, and before the Horlicks rock of Sit Down became ubiquitous, James were an invigorating prospect: a folk-pop band apparently engaged in a bout of pro-wrestling with their instruments. Their debut album clangs like a grand piano tumbling downstairs - leaving singalong melodies in its wake.

Jane's Addiction

Nothing's Shocking (1988)

Questing, querulous and defiantly provocative, Perry Farrell's magnificently epic rockers were the unashamedly arty wing of the late 1980s LA rock scene. Farrell's keening vocal, Dave Navarro's - quixotic guitar and some astute - if un-PC - lyrical leanings made eruptions like Ocean Size and Mountain Song essential and unforgettable.

Bert Jansch

Bert Jansch (1965)

With Dylan it was all about the words, with Jansch the guitar, and never more so than on his keening, threadbare debut. Those spindly, music-box pickings carried British folk into new waters, and came to bear on everyone from Davey Graham to Led Zeppelin. It's virtuosic, but restless, and utterly moving. Needle of Death might still be the saddest of all softly sung tragedies.

Japan

Tin Drum (1981)

All eyeliner and reference points, Japan seemed not so much a band as a phase to be gone through. That, though, would deny their strength of purpose. A single, Ghosts, took the sound of paranoid bats in a windy belfry into the Top 20. Their final LP, meanwhile, refined their intellectual pop aesthetic into a stylish, glossy monochrome.

Victor Jara

Chile September 1973 Manifesto (1998)

Released to mark the 25th anniversary of the murder of the great Chilean singer by the military authorities in 1973, this poignant version of Jara's unfinished album includes Adrian Mitchell reading his final poem, Chile Stadium. Jara's songs provide a stirring reminder of why he has remained an influence on singers such as Robert Wyatt.

Keith Jarrett

The Köln Concert (1975)

The best-selling piano record ever, in any idiom. Distrusting an inferior instrument on this unaccompanied gig, Jarrett stuck to the mid-range and improvised - with sweeping imagination - around a handful of ostinatos and grooves. The result is a hypnotic, romantically lyrical and country-tinged tour de force.

Jay-Z

The Black Album (2003)

For what was meant to be his last studio album, Shawn Carter delivered his most open, intense and honest rhymes. Though the reality fell short of the professed dream (the plan was 10 collaborations with 10 great hip-hop producers), it's his strongest, most consistently inspired set, if not generally his most lauded.

Jefferson Airplane

Surrealistic Pillow (1967)

San Francisco psychedelia captured just before pomposity and bloat set in. Low on indulgent jamming, the songs come in sharp, remarkably potent flashes. Jefferson Airplane would never again sound as concise or powerful as on White Rabbit and Somebody to Love; even the shifting, episodic She Has Funny Cars lasts barely three minutes.

Billy Jenkins and the Voice of God Collective

Scratches of Spain (1987)

The LP sleeve pastiched Miles Davis, and the music served as a strange collision of post-punk anger, Gil Evans-ish chamber jazz and bathetic English satire (sample title: Benidorm Motorway Services). This convinced us that erstwhile glam punk guitarist Jenkins really had become an inspiringly maverick bandleader of great importance.

The Jesus and Mary Chain

Psychocandy (1985)

They may never have matched the shock of first single Upside Down, but the Reid brothers' marriage of 1960s psychedelic pop melodies and raking, jagged feedback was consummated in fine style on this debut. Just Like Honey was the Shangri-Las in an acid bath; Never Understand,

the Beach Boys dragged through a punk rock riot; You Trip Me Up, a summery saunter through a hail of noise.

Elton John

Goodbye Yellow Brick Road (1973)

For an album that wallows in sepia-tinged nostalgia, name-checking John Dillinger, Roy Rogers and Marilyn Monroe, Elton John's masterpiece still sounds thrillingly modern. His enthusiasm, sentiment and sense of fun knits the ballads, prog-rock, cod reggae and glitzy pop together with an energy John soon lost.

Linton Kwesi Johnson

Dread Beat an' Blood (1978)

The record that invented "dub poetry" remains a milestone in British urban black music. Dennis Bovell's Dub Band provided anvil-heavy beats to frame Johnson's withering monologues about the 1970s black experience in "Inglan".

Robert Johnson

King of the Delta Blues Singers (1961)

Robert Johnson is the original embodiment of the most enduring myth in popular culture. Not the one about the blues guitarist who sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads - although that was him, too, a rumour probably circulated by envious contemporaries. The other myth: the one about living fast, dying young and leaving a beautiful body of work behind you, in Johnson's case a small but immaculate collection of the most affecting blues songs in existence. For about the same price as King of the Delta Blues Singers, you can get, in Columbia's two-CD set, 41 of the 42 recordings Johnson is known to have made before his death in 1938, aged 27, of pneumonia, which the notorious womaniser contracted after being poisoned by a jealous husband. But that runs alternate takes of individual songs consecutively, and while there's pleasure to be had in noting how Johnson reworked his material - hammering a chord here, clarifying a lyric there - listening to it inevitably makes one feel like an anorak. Anything you need to know about Johnson - about most rock music, because on its 1960s release this influenced every guitar giant of that decade - is on this 17-track compilation. Crossroad Blues encapsulates black existence in 1930s America: Johnson's despair at his low-grade citizenship is palpable. Terraplane Blues takes the tongue-in-cheek "raunchy" form prevalent at the time and makes it raw with heartsore feeling. Me and the Devil Blues pulsates with resignation at the fate of a man given to women and drink. But there was warmth and humour in his songs, too, not to mention a diamantine brilliance about his guitar-playing - so virtuosic that Stones guitarist Keith Richards confessed he initially thought two men were behind it. Johnson was haunted by the restless ambition to transcend his time and place: how profoundly he achieved that dream. Maddy Costa

Daniel Johnston

1990 (1990)

There's an uncomfortable voyeurism in listening to music borne of mental illness, but 1990 is a strong argument in favour of so-called "outsider music". Alternately terrifying and terrified, deeply moving and plaintively beautiful, Johnston's songs are perhaps the solitary positive aspect of their creator's anguish: great art made in the most desperate of circumstances.

George Jones

The Essential George Jones: The Spirit of Country Music (1998)

Like his idol, Hank Williams, Jones is the bloodied but unbowed heart of country. As famous for his temper, battles with booze and fondness for driving lawnmowers as for his voice, he flies the flag for old-fashioned country and timeless misery.

Grace Jones

Nightclubbing (1981)

After her camp disco beginnings, Jones pitched up in the Bahamas with Chris Blackwell for this,

an album of dub-soaked pop propelled by the super salacious Pull Up to the Bumper and the Sting-penned Demolition Man. In keeping with reggae's fondness for cover versions, Jones betters Iggy Pop's Nightclubbing.

Janis Joplin

Pearl (1971)

The tragic Texan's final album is still the benchmark for blues-sodden, emotional female vocalists. Raw songs of abandonment such as Me and Bobby McGee and A Woman Left Lonely are delivered with gut-wrenching honesty. The 27-year-old's drug overdose during sessions meant Buried Alive in the Blues remained a chillingly titled instrumental.

Josef K

Entomology (2006)

With their name taken from Kafka, it's somehow apt that Josef K's definitive album shouldn't appear until 25 years after the band's demise. Entomology cherry-picks from an unreleased debut, its bona fide successor plus singles and Peel sessions, successfully spearing the influential Edinburgh quartet's spiky art-pop and existential jive.

Joy Division

Closer (1980)

The arrival of Joy Division's second album in the aftermath of Ian Curtis's suicide brought with it a shadow of death that disguised Closer's expressions of life: the clattering energy of Atrocity Exhibition, the metallic pop of Isolation and the virtuosity of Curtis's baritone. Still, its final songs, The Eternal and Decades, are untouchable in their manifestations of abject despair.

Joyce

Just a Little Bit Crazy (2003)

Brazilian songwriter Joyce has hardly put a foot wrong in her long career. This brilliant but atypical album draws on Scandinavian nu-jazz (courtesy of Bugge Wesseltoft) to spice up an exemplary home team, including husband Tutty Moreno on drums.

Judas Priest

British Steel (1980)

Heavy metal existed before 1980, but British Steel, released just as British metal was rising, codified it. Priest brought the leather and studs (contributed by their gay singer, Rob Halford), the combination of brute riffs with big hooks (exemplified on Living After Midnight), and the pride in being heavy. Not for nothing was there a song entitled Metal Gods.

Junior Boys

Last Exit (2004)

Last Exit is a cocoon of an album, one to play on loop when feeling at a loss. Beats click, whirr and settle into gentle grooves, basslines provide aural comfort and the melodies are rich with mood and heart. Meanwhile, Jeremy Greenspan's voice - tremulous and fragile, but never ineffectual - slips in and out of the electronic fuzz like a ghost.

Artists beginning with K

Tuesday November 20, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

K'naan

The Dusty Foot Philosopher (2005)

A escapee from wartorn Somalia, by the time he was 26 K'naan Warsame had delivered this brutally candid missive from his adopted Canada. A record of poetic rapping and eye-popping storytelling, it's infinitely closer to the tumbling wordplay of 60s icons the Last Poets than to the showiness of Jay-Z or Kanye.

Salif Keita

Soro (1987)

This is the album that established Salif Keita as an international star, and brought the African desert state of Mali to the attention of western music fans. It was recorded in Paris with a band that included brass and keyboards, but was remarkable for Keita's powerful, soulful vocals and lyrics inspired by the ancient history of his homeland.

Kelis

Kaleidoscope (1999)

Kelis Rogers gatecrashed the pop landscape with the vengeful, raging Caught Out There. On its parent album, she would prove herself equally adept at hip-swivelling, lusty grooves and sumptuous, psychedelic balladry; and her production team, the Neptunes, would go on to shape the next half-decade of pop.

Stan Kenton

City of Glass (1995)

Unconventional swing bandleader Kenton liked massive volume and huge bands, complex and highly structured works, classical references (Stravinsky and Ravel particularly); he delivered a kind of prog-jazz of the 40s and 50s. It could be hyperbolic, but these are some of the best-realised of his experimental works, with remarkable arrangements by Bob Graettinger.

Khaled

Khaled (1992)

Up until this point, Algeria's singer-most-likely-to... had earned his stripes backed by the cheap Casio sound that typified home-produced rai. This record, with Don Was at the controls, offered a widescreen canvas and took Khaled international, thanks in large part to the limb-loosening global funk of Didi.

Johnny Kidd and the Pirates

25 Greatest Hits (1998)

You probably don't need 23 of the songs here but the first two are perhaps the only British rock'n'roll songs fit to stand beside the US greats. Shakin' All Over and Please Don't Touch - both later covered by the Who and Motörhead/Girlschool respectively - have a sleaziness utterly missing from anything by Kidd's Britrock rivals.

The Killers

Hot Fuss (2004)

A British indie band who weren't British. An 80s sound that wasn't from the 80s. The Killers were a confusing proposition, but one unashamed of ambition, and equipped with choruses big enough to silence critics. The likes of Mr Brightside and Somebody Told Me won over teeny-boppers, indie kids and those nostalgic for everyone from Duran Duran to the Smiths.

Killing Joke

Killing Joke (1980)

No other band defined living in the shadow of the Bomb like Killing Joke. Truculent and posterously heavy, this rampaging debut united punks and metallers in limb-flailing,

dancefloor-shredding mayhem and was a profound influence on industrial/leftfield innovators from Nine Inch Nails to Nirvana.

Soweto Kinch

Conversations With the Unseen (2003)

Soweto Kinch burst on the scene with a new way of playing jazz, combining edgy post-bop with hand-played versions of the grooves and broken beats of hip-hop. This debut demonstrates Kinch's complex but beguiling tunes, but what makes *Conversations* special is his thoughtful rapping.

King Crimson

In the Court of the Crimson King (1969)

King Crimson were one of the original progressive rock bands and although their debut apparently didn't capture their monstrously powerful live sound, its combination of Mellotron-led anthems, complete with Peter Sinfield's absurdly rococo lyrics, snarling jazz rock and meditative free improvisational passages, still sounds mightily impressive.

Carole King

Tapestry (1971)

On first listen nothing more than a likable collection of dreamy west coast songwriting, *Tapestry* turned out to be far greater than the sum of its parts. Spurred on by King's husky voice and the single *It's Too Late*, it sold and sold, spending six years in the chart and influencing everyone from Carly Simon to Tori Amos.

The Kinks

Face to Face (1966)

Invariably rushed and underfunded, the Kinks' albums were overshadowed by their unimpeachable 60s singles. But here, they finally attained a kind of perfection: music poised between raw R&B, languid psychedelia and music-hall affectation. Ray Davies' sublime songwriting is savage yet affectionate in its satire of fading aristocrats and aspirant working classes alike.

KLF

The White Room (1991)

Memories of the KLF usually focus on their high art concepts - the dead sheep and machine guns at the Brits - or their premature retirement and subsequent burning of a million quid. But the duo's antics were only possible because they stormed the global charts with this magnificent collection of acid-house pop.

The Knife

Silent Shout (2006)

The mind-blowing and singularly disquieting sound of a band pushing themselves to the limits of pop, *Silent Shout* is dominated by a sense of sinister dysfunction. Karin Dreijer sings as though on the brink of insanity through a forest of mangled electronics and stabbing beats. Brrrr.

Konono No 1

Congotronics (2005)

This groundbreaking debut from the six-strong Congolese collective blasts out of the speakers like a thrilling parade of west African rave. Combining the firepower of amplified thumb pianos, carnival vocals and whistles, its relentless rhythms suggest Steve Reich's modern compositions, raucous electronica - and the greatest party ever.

Kool & the Gang

The Very Best Of (1999)

This collection covers the various phases of this New Jersey dance troupe, who formed in 1964 as a jazz band, from their early-70s gritty funk work-outs such as Jungle Boogie (featured in Pulp Fiction) to their smooth 80s disco standbys, including Celebration and Get Down On It.

Bassekou Kouyate and Ngoni Ba

Segu Blue (2007)

Bassekou Kouyate is an exponent of the n'goni, the ancient west African lute, but he has been compared to Hendrix because of his extraordinary improvised playing. After working with guitar hero Ali Farka Touré, he founded his own band, which includes four n'goni players and his wife, the singer Ami Sacko, and is dominated by his virtuoso, often rapid-fire solos.

Kraftwerk

The Mix (1991)

A work of sacrilege, according to the German faux-cyborgs' more hard-bitten disciples, though this retooling of their Greatest Hits was kept in-house, and was thus the model of subtlety and restraint. The best example: a sharpened-up Autobahn, which arguably improves on the original.

Lenny Kravitz

Let Love Rule (1989)

Lenny Kravitz wrote, produced and played almost all the instruments on this debut, marking him out as Prince's heir apparent. Subtle, funky, peppered with sax and social comment, it was attacked for its retro feel and debt to the Beatles, but now sounds like a breath of fresh air.

Kronos Quartet/ Pat Metheny/Steve Reich Different Trains/Electric Counterpoint (1990)

Different Trains, with its locomotive rhythms and melodies generated by the cadences of speech, is a meditation on Reich's wartime childhood and the fate of Jews in the Holocaust; it's the composer's most moving work. A piece for overdubbed guitars, Electric Counterpoint was notoriously sampled by the Orb for Little Fluffy Clouds.

Kruder & Dorfmeister

The K&D Sessions (1998)

Viennese trip-hop experts Kruder & Dorfmeister never got around to releasing an album under their own name, perhaps because they used up all their best ideas on remixing other people. On this bumper-sized compilation, they are dub-updating heirs to Lee "Scratch" Perry, ushering the likes of Depeche Mode and Lamb into their stoned netherworld.

Fela Kuti

The Best of Fela Kuti: Music Is the Weapon

One of the most colourful figures in the history of African music, Fela Kuti was a bandleader, songwriter, singer, saxophonist, keyboard-player and percussionist who pioneered a new style of Nigerian music, afrobeat, in which he mixed traditional styles with Western funk and jazz. But he was equally known for his wild, flamboyant lifestyle, his angry political songs and often painful battles with the Nigerian military authorities. He recorded more than 50 albums before his death in 1997, but was never as well known in Europe and America as Bob Marley, in many ways his Jamaican equivalent. He faced harassment by the Nigerian authorities - in 1984, he was jailed as he was preparing for a major American tour, and was declared a political prisoner by Amnesty. Within Nigeria, Kuti became a celebrity, thanks both to his music and rebel stance. He declared the area around his club in Lagos, the Shrine, to be an independent state, the Kalakuta Republic, protected by an electric fence. It was at the Shrine that Fela's firebrand politics and musical invention were seen and heard at their best. He came on stage around two or three in the morning, often puffing on a joint as he launched into his angry attacks on the government or corruption in Nigerian society. His lengthy songs mixed thunderous percussion with his own improvised solos and call-and-response vocals, in which he was answered back by his well-choreographed female chorus. His decision in 1978 to marry all of his 27 singers and dancers on the same day added to his notoriety and legend (though, in 1986, he announced that marriage

was a bad idea and divorced them all). It's difficult to capture on record the sense of danger, anger and invention that marked out Fela's best live performances, but this set, released after his death, is a reminder that he should be remembered for his music and not just his lifestyle. It includes a DVD of a documentary filmed in Lagos in 1982, which includes several performances from the Shrine. The two-CD set includes many of his best songs, from the cheerful, upbeat Lady and the slinky Zombie, notable for its funky guitar work and fine sax solos, through to the angry ITT (International Thief Thief) and perhaps his most bitter work, Coffin for Head of State, a - reference to the most violent incident in Fela's often painful career. In 1977, the self-proclaimed republic around Kuti's club was attacked by soldiers, after he had embarrassed President Olusegun Obasanjo by refusing to take part in a pan-African festival held in Lagos. Kuti claimed his singers and dancers were raped, and that his mother died after being thrown from a window. Later, he presented Obasanjo with a replica of his mother's coffin - and a song that combines the musical originality and political fury of one of Africa's greatest performers. Robin Denselow

Artists beginning with L

Tuesday November 20, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Bappi Lahiri

Disco Dancer OST (1982)

Disco music arrived late to Indian cinema, but when it did it inspired a glittering array of sonic adventures and plotlines. Bappi Lahiri's Disco Dancer set the template by rewiring classic anthems from the likes of Giorgio Moroder, Frank Farian and Ottawan. Twenty-five years on, the kitsch soundtrack can be heard on hipster dancefloors (MIA recently sampled the album's centerpiece, Jimmy) and Asian wedding parties the world over.

The La's

BBC In Session (2006)

If the slim recorded output of the La's has been dulled by familiarity, a new perspective comes from this collection of their complete BBC recordings that offer markedly different and sometimes better versions of much-loved songs - witness a wildly rockier take on There She Goes.

Lambchop

What Another Man Spills (1998)

Lambchop recorded their fourth album when frontman Kurt Wagner was still sanding floors for a living; the sense of release, joy, rightness he felt surrounded by his motley orchestra infuses every note. Less stately than later releases, it's a sumptuous blend of country, soul and offbeat poetry.

KD Lang

Ingenu (1992)

After four alt-country albums, Canada's Kathryn Dawn Lang and her collaborator Ben Mink abandoned Nashville to record this album of Peggy Lee-influenced "post-nuclear cabaret". The mournful break-up anthem Constant Craving made her so big that Lang quickly came out - and was soon being wet-shaved by Cindy Crawford on the cover of Vanity Fair.

Daniel Lanois

Shine (2003)

He is better known for his productions with Dylan and U2, but the Canadian's best solo album applies the same skills to combinations of rock, folk, Cajun and blues. Recorded all over the world, the hushed, contemplative songs are outstanding homages to the eerie power of restlessness and desolation.

LCD Soundsystem

Sound of Silver (2007)

James Murphy was the key figure in New York's early-noughties dance-punk explosion. Sound of Silver was a more compact statement than LCD's sprawling 2005 debut, though, not least because songs such as Someone Great and All My Friends ventured out across more emotional terrain.

Leadbelly

Take This Hammer: The Complete RCA Victor Recordings (2003)

A hero in the 50s for the British skiffle movement, and in the 90s for Kurt Cobain, Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, was a forceful black folk singer and songwriter who was first discovered singing in prison in 1933. He became a major star thanks to songs like Midnight Special and Take This Hammer, both featured on this classic set.

Nara Leao

The Muse of Bossa Nova (2003)

Other Brazilian musicians called her their "muse", but Leao was also a fine singer and guitarist, and played an important role in the musical campaign against the military regime that took power in 1964. This set shows how she could tackle bossa standards with her gloriously cool, light voice, and then switch to a poignant protest song.

Led Zeppelin

Physical Graffiti (1975)

Physical Graffiti, their sixth album, saw Led Zeppelin undertaking in the studio the kind of epic journeys they were already making on stage. Reflecting their mysticism (Kashmir), prime riffing (Trampled Underfoot) and their ribald sexuality (Custard Pie), this was big anyway, but its stature has only grown.

The Left Banke

There's Gonna Be a Storm (1999)

Taking their cue from the Stones of Lady Jane rather than Satisfaction, the Left Banke added harpischord to R&B in the mid 60s and came up with Baroque Pop. It's no novelty; it sounds great, and Walk Away Renee has enduring power.

Leftfield

Leftfism (1995)

Leftfield's prime achievement was to operate in a genre known as progressive house and make music that was far more enticing than that categorisation suggests. Leftfism swirled with audacious beats and compelling rhythms; the Open Up collaboration with John Lydon remains one of the defining anthems of post-acid-house techno.

Michel Legrand

Les Parapluies de Cherbourg OST (1996)

It wasn't enough that Jacques Demy's 1964 love story should be one of the most sumptuously designed, emotionally ravishing films ever made. With every word of dialogue sung, it also had to sound gorgeous. And indeed, Michel Legrand's jazz-opera score does - enough to scintillate and beguile without any visual embellishment.

Lemon Jelly

Lost Horizons (2002)

The whimsical more-acid-vicar? spirit of English psychedelia resurfaced on Fred Deakin and Nick Franglen's full-length debut. Benign but never bland, it's animated by a sense of wonder and mischief, as Nasa transmissions flow into an old man's plummy reminiscences, and children's rhymes segue into an unsettling medical description of death.

Lemonheads

It's a Shame About Ray (1992)

On the face of it, a stoned rich kid drawling about his domestic minutiae should be among music's less appealing prospects. But Evan Dando had three things going for him: his incredible ability to write melodies that combined timelessness and familiarity; his wonderful, warm voice and bucketloads of charm. No new ground is broken, but not a note is out of place.

John Lennon

The Plastic Ono Band (1970)

After the Beatles break-up, Lennon and Yoko Ono underwent primal scream therapy. Forced to confront his innermost demons, Lennon poured his anguish over his childhood, parental abandonment, class, the band and isolation into harrowing but inspired songs such as Mother and Working Class Hero. They remain unmatched torrents of angry introspection.

Larry Levan

Live at the Paradise Garage (2000)

For two decades, Larry Levan's DJ sets at New York's Paradise Garage were mythic, remembered in hyperbolic terms by those who heard them. If this archive recording doesn't live up to the legend - lacking in Levan's fabled play-anything eclecticism - it's still a gloriously uplifting document of disco at its peak.

Level 42

World Machine (1985)

A jazz-funk influence, slap bass, and archetypal 1980s production - tread carefully here. But bear in mind that Level 42 could produce consummate pop songs that, for those around at the time, may well deliver a pleasurable Proustian rush. Herein are two well-turned examples; the sun-kissed Something About You and the uncharacteristically dolorous Leaving Me Now.

Barbara Lewis

The Many Grooves of Barbara Lewis (1969)

The Michigan singer had plenty of hits behind her (Hello Stranger, Baby I'm Yours, Make Me Belong To You) by the time she cut this tough but ultra-melodic album. The anti-Aretha, Lewis's cool vocals sit cat-like on thunderous drums, clipped Philly guitar and proto-70s smooth strings.

Jerry Lee Lewis

Live at the Star Club, Hamburg (1980)

It should be terrible, ghoulish listening; a star out of favour and fashion, recorded at his lowest ebb, in 1964. Instead, it's Lewis' greatest album. Backed by the Nashville Teens, his performance vibrates with extraordinary, presumably chemically-assisted rage - the breathtaking, barely contained sound of a man with nothing left to lose, coming out fighting.

LFO

Frequencies (1991)

LFO's debut was an early Warp classic, providing a viable northern British alternative to Detroit techno and Chicago acid house from these pioneers of the hypnotic groove. With its bleeps, subsonic bass, strange FX and odd mix of symphonic elegance and harsh textures, the album paved the way for Aphex, Autechre et al.

The Libertines

Up the Bracket (2003)

Before they became a soap opera, the Libertines were the last gang in town, winning over sceptical hearts and spawning countless bands. Equally influenced by Chas & Dave and the Clash, their debut bears witness to the desperate beauty and battling British spirit of the fatally torpedoed ship, Albion.

Lieutenant Pigeon

Mouldy Old Music (1972)

This was the soundtrack to Britain's three-day week in the 70s. The mix of ragtime piano, heavy compression and slapback echo on the title track is but a taster for bizarre collages, backwards loops, and more Neanderthal grunts. Psychedelic in a rather brown way; Alice through the pint glass, if you like.

Lift to Experience

The Texas-Jerusalem Crossroads (2002)

Lift to Experience burst out of Texas, released this album and promptly disappeared. But what the trio left behind is both startling and unique. It's a post-rock-country hybrid that burns with religious fury and genuine conviction from angelic singer Josh T Pearson, on a harrowing trip through damnation to salvation.

Light of the World

Light of the World (1979)

Light of the World offered a polished but punchy homegrown version of 70s US R&B Britfunk. With offshoots and spin-off projects such as Incognito and Beggar & Co, they were Britfunk's mothership, while early club classics such as Swingin' and Pete's Crusade proved this London massive could rival American outfits beat for beat.

Gordon Lightfoot

Summer Side Of Life (1971)

If Bob Dylan was the philosopher and Phil Ochs the politician, then Lightfoot was the carpenter of the 60s folk scene. His voice was pure Canadian redwood, his songs sounded carved and caressed. This was his seventh and most complete album, straddling Greenwich Village roots and the carefree highway he hit in the 70s.

The Lilac Time The Lilac Time (1987) Either two decades behind or 15 years ahead of its time, the Lilac Time's debut offered very British folk-rock: you can almost feel the frost crunching underfoot during the spartan opener, Black Velvet. Elsewhere, accordions wheeze, banjos are plucked and erstwhile teen idol Stephen Duffy finally finds his voice, singing of sepia-tinted romance and a mythic, bucolic England.

Arto Lindsay

Noon Chill (1997)

Lindsay made his name as a noisy New York guitarist (and with a cameo in Desperately Seeking Susan). His mysterious reinvention as the auteur of sexy solo albums gives hope to bespectacled geeks everywhere. Noon Chill is one of his best, with inspired collaborators such as Melvin Gibbs and Vinicius Cantuária.

Linx

Intuition (1981)

Linx were future Fame Academy vocal coach David Grant and Peter "Sketch" Martin, later of avant-funk troupe 23 Skidoo. The British Rodgers & Edwards, they had ambitions as a writing/production unit to rival the Chic Organisation. Their debut is an overlooked example of intelligent club-pop, eight years ahead of Soul II Soul.

Little Richard**The Original British Hit Singles** (1999)

We've become so accustomed to thinking of Little Richard as a cuddly old bloke that hearing a solid blast of his music can suddenly make you sit up. Suddenly you understand how shocking a gay black man in make-up, shrieking sexual slang over monstrously aggressive music, must have sounded 50 years ago. The best of this - Keep a Knockin' especially - can never be tamed.

Lo'Jo**Au Cabaret Sauvage** (2002)

A direct benefit of the cultural shrinking of the planet is records like this. Equal parts chanson, Arabic, cabaret, African, jazz and dub, the Robert Plant-approved collective scaled new heights with this global offering, brimming with tales of restlessness and travel told by the Loire's own answer to Tom Waits.

Julie London**Julie Is Her Name** (1955)

With her languorous whisper of a voice, London rendered the lounge standards that she sang anything but standard. Her debut album features the definitive, haunting version of Cry Me a River and her husky take on Showboat's Can't Help Loving That Man. London, the record and sleeve all make cameos in the Jayne Mansfield film The Girl Can't Help It.

Orlando Cachaito López**Cachaito** (2001)

Even though the Buena Vista Social Club franchise had thoroughly shaken up world music, nobody was quite ready for this sprawling, eclectic and slightly bonkers album from bassist Cachaito and producer Nick Gold, which mashes reggae, jazz and French hip-hop with Cuba's finest.

Los de Abajo**Cybertropic Chilango Power** (2002)

They describe their music as "tropipunk" - a combination of Latin rhythms and urban beats that reflects the energy of Mexico City. This slick, sophisticated and wildly varied set mixes anything from brass-backed Latin dance songs with a political edge through to accordion tunes mixed with rap sequences, and slinky ballads dissected with guitar and dub effects.

Joe Lovano Ensemble**Streams of Expression** (2006)

Lovano is a hugely resourceful contemporary reed-player, who bridges the swing era to Ornette Coleman and beyond. Here he is dealing not with Miles Davis remakes, but with what Miles made possible. Classic Birth of the Cool themes are framed within Lovano's music: he swells from the airy countermelodies of Moon Dreams like Ben Webster, but sounds like Ornette playing a clarinet on Enchantment.

Love**Forever Changes** (1967)

A year of violent civil-rights struggles and heavy casualties in Vietnam. High in the Hollywood hills, Love watched the counterculture flaming out. Arthur Lee's lyrics express the hippy dream and its paranoid comedown over strung-out guitar lines and sprawling orchestral arrangements that are forever imitated but never matched.

The Lovin' Spoonful**Greatest Hits** (2000)

Perennially underrated, either because of their unabashed pop sensibility or because their albums were desperately uneven, the Lovin' Spoonful are best heard here: a transcendent and timeless

run of singles that spans folk, rock and, in *Do You Believe In Magic?*, perhaps the most perfect expression of the transcendent joy of pop music ever written.

LTJ Bukem

Presents Logical Progression (1996)

LTJ Bukem's twin labels, Good Looking and Looking Good, took the heat and sweat out of drum'n'bass. This airy, jazz-inflected new blueprint was destined to end blandly, but on Bukem's first compilation the ideas were fresh and the tunes plentiful, from PFM's lush cyber-soul to Photek's Zen clarity.

Luscious Jackson

In Search of Manny (1992)

Formed in 1991, the all-female group Luscious Jackson featured former Beastie Boys drummer Kate Schellenbach; they were the first artists to record for the Beasties' Grand Royal label. Their debut is a sassy, witty collection oscillating between pop, funk and hip-hop. The highlight is *Life of Leisure*, a tale of a slacker boyfriend set to big-band loops.

Loretta Lynn

The Definitive Collection (2005)

If you like your country served with a dollop of down-home sentimentality, Dolly's for you. If, however, it's straight-talkin', sharp-shootin' country you're after, Loretta's your gal. Whether she is hymning the contraceptive pill or kicking an errant lover in the pants, her raunchy sensibility is invigorating.

Lynyrd Skynyrd

Pronounced Leh-nerd Skin-nerd (1973)

Concluding with an air-guitarist's dream (*Free Bird*), Lynyrd Skynyrd's debut is a chilled slice of southern rock. From the political hoe-down of *Things Goin' On* to the lighters-aloft anthem *Tuesday's Gone*, their bluesy swagger manages to be artfully complex without ever seeming to exert itself more than necessary.

Humphrey Lyttleton

and His Band The Parlophones Vols 1-4 (1996)

To many he is only an urbane voice on Radio 4, but octogenarian Lyttleton is still a road-going trumpeter, and this is where he started in the 40s and 50s - putting UK jazz on the map by celebrating the early American version, but with growing independence through the 50s.

Artists beginning with M (part 1)

Tuesday November 20, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Baaba Maal & Mansour Seck

Djam Leelii (1984)

Two gentlemen of Senegal, a pair of guitars, a rolling tape machine and voices cutting right through the night air. *Djam Leelii* (it means *The Adventurers*) remains an untouchable west African classic that never grows old. Stately, sinuous and sublime.

Kirsty MacColl

Galore (1995)

Forget Kate Moss - Kirsty MacColl will always be Croydon's greatest export. This sublime selection of tracks from her first four albums is a reminder of her genius as a songwriter: her unique, down-to-earth voice and uncomplicated honesty shine through styles as diverse as 1960s girl groups, country and early-1990s pop.

Joanna MacGregor

Play (2001)

Pianist Joanna MacGregor came within a single vote of winning the 2002 Mercury music prize with this impressive calling card, featuring brief, beautifully prepared tastings of Ligeti, Nancarrow, Dowland, Piazzola, Ives, Cage, Bach and Talvin Singh, seasoned with touches of boogie woogie, stride piano, Keith Jarrett-ish minimalism and Satie-esque playfulness.

Thee Madcap Courtship

I Know Elektrikboy (1999)

The loose concept dreamed up by Chicago producer Felix da Housecat - futuristic hero outwits anti-dance fascists - may sound ominously like We Will Rock You for clubbers. But this is one of dance music's great lost classics, presaging electroclash's 80s fetishism with its acid-Moroder basslines and poignant cyber-Prince R&B.

Madness

Divine Madness (1992)

A collection of tracks by the finest singles band of the 80s. After winning friends with the nutty sound of Baggy Trousers and House of Fun, Madness matured into a wistful pop group. The results were no less satisfying, and you may find something in your eye when you revisit One Better Day or Our House.

Madonna

Like a Prayer (1989)

Madonna's presence in pop was crucial for young girls in the 1980s. Dressed in don't-fuck-with-me gloves and silver crosses, her tongue barbed and ready, here at last was a headstrong young woman, whose powerful songs spoke to their hearts and their minds. With huge hits about sexuality (Like a Virgin) and pregnancy (Papa Don't Preach), she raised pop's game and purpose by miles. But by 1989, the clock was ticking fast. Having had a three-year gap between studio LPs - an aeon in pop terms - Madonna's new record had to be something special to silence the critics. Like a Prayer shut them up. At the time, the press described this as her "serious album", a theory given ballast by her divorce from Sean Penn, a spell in a Mamet play on Broadway and her world-shattering decision to go brunette. It shows off Madonna at her best. The title track remains the greatest example of her art, even without the controversial Black Jesus video that accompanied it - a huge, gospel-flavoured pop statement. Elsewhere, anger crackles and burns. Express Yourself is a starter lesson in female empowerment, blaring with sass; Till Death Do Us Part a raucous hi-NRG annihilation of her broken marriage. The ballads are heartbreakers - Promise to Try addresses the death of her mother from breast cancer, while Oh Father's sad pianos settle old scores. Since then, Madonna has reinvented herself, flitting between roles of starlet, mother, Kabbalah queen and lady of the manor. None of them has suited her as well as the character she knew best - the frank, flawed woman who lived behind the masks. Jude Rogers

Madvillain

Madvillainy (2004)

Snatching the mantle of rap's oddball-in-chief from Kool Keith, Daniel "MF Doom" Dumile wears a metal face mask and records under a fistful of aliases. Madvillainy, in tandem with producer Madlib, is the one to start with: its busy unpredictability and stoned comic-book mythos offer a colourful window into Dumile's world.

Magazine

Real Life (1978)

Released in April 78, Magazine's debut was the first post-punk album. And Howard Devoto was the first post-punk anti-star, with his cryptic lyrics and anxious-young-man persona. Real Life had punk energy and art-rock ambition, with complex song structures and sophisticated musicianship.

Magnetic Fields

69 Love Songs (1999)

Stephin Merritt's meticulous modernisation of the Great American Songbook is an absurd folly - a giddy explosion of wit, whimsy, inspiration and ambition that is matchless in its achievement. Every imaginable romantic experience is refracted through every imaginable genre of music, with moods and sounds glittering like mirror-ball lights across a disco floor.

Taj Mahal

The Natch'l Blues (1968)

One of the great exponents of black music in all its forms, Taj Mahal has recorded with big bands and tackled songs from across Africa, Hawaii and the Caribbean. But he is at his best showing off his slinky, rhythmic finger-picking guitar style and laid-back vocals on blues-edged songs such as Corinna, first recorded on this classic early album.

Mahavishnu Orchestra

The Inner Mounting Flame (1971)

Guitarist John McLaughlin and drummer Billy Cobham had both played with Miles Davis, but the five-piece Mahavishnu Orchestra were a radically different proposition. One of the first - and best - jazz-rock bands, they produced music that consisted of big themes and ecstatic ensemble improvisations, all played with astonishing speed and fire.

Miriam Makeba

The Definitive Collection (2002)

The first black superstar to emerge from apartheid-era South Africa, back in the 50s, Makeba is still surely the finest female singer the continent has produced. As this set shows, she could cover anything from rousing township styles (either solo or with vocal help from the Skylarks), to jazz ballads, as shown here by a 90s collaboration with Dizzy Gillespie.

Mahlathini & the Mahotella Queens

Thokozile (1986)

Growling frontman Mahlathini, his backing singers the Mahotella Queens and the diamond-hard Makgona Tsohle Band gave us an exhilarating lesson in elasticated township jive, released in South Africa the same year Paul Simon did Graceland. Its impact wasn't reduced a jot by the discovery that the real name of Mahlathini, the self-proclaimed Lion of Soweto, was Simon.

The Mamas and the Papas

If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears (1966)

This was the album that propelled the quartet to the forefront of the following year's Summer of Love; the Mamas' four-part harmonies were the freshest sound since the Beatles. The band was notoriously volatile, but songs such as California Dreamin' and Monday Monday are the epitome of sun-soaked, hallucinatory love vibes.

The Manhattans

Best Of (1995)

A Top 5 hit in 1976, Kiss and Say Goodbye was the soul version of Brief Encounter from these heartache harmonisers, who formed in the early 60s. More vocally varied than their peers, the Manhattans worked with producer Bobby Martin at Philly's Sigma Sound to create orchestrated R&B at its velvety-smooth best.

Manic Street Preachers

The Holy Bible (1994)

Weary of peddling their singular blend of situationism and heavy metal, the Manic Street Preachers staged an internal cultural revolution. Main songwriter Richey Edwards' fevered philosophising veers from Auschwitz and Foucault to his own negation, with post-punk militarism the musical key. A brilliant, sometimes worrisome triumph of intellect over reason.

Herbie Mann

Memphis Underground (1968)

A journeyman flautist with a good feel for bossa nova, Mann broke out of the jazz ghetto with this 1968 bestseller. Its funky versions of southern soul standards and show tunes can be seen as a precursor to "smooth jazz", but guitarists Larry Coryell, Sonny Sharrock and Reggie Young add a wonderfully vicious edge to proceedings.

Mariza

Fado Em Mim (2001)

Mariza singlehandedly transformed the Portuguese music scene by bringing fado to an international audience. Impossibly tall and elegant, and with a cool, versatile voice and theatrical style perfectly suited to the often sad-edged fado ballads, she brought the songs back into fashion among young singers in Lisbon.

Bob Marley & the Wailers

Soul Revolutionaries: The Early Jamaican Albums (2005)

Before Bob Marley was sanctified, the Wailers were soul rebels - three rudeboys fighting for space at the birth of reggae. This Trojan box set showcases their superb harmony singing, songwriting skills and evolving political consciousness. Lee Perry is at the controls. If you only own Legend, start again here.

Wynton Marsalis

Marsalis Plays Monk: Standard Time Vol 4 (1999)

Marsalis's grand-design spectaculars, and his spirited or arch-conservative defence (depending on your view) of a classically blues-based jazz, can obscure interesting music-making - for instance, this devotedly oddball reworking of Thelonious Monk's spiky themes within the sound of a pre-Monk 30s Armstrong-style band.

Warne Marsh

Release Record, Send Tape (1999)

Californian tenor saxophonist Marsh was one of the great unsung melodic improvisers. Schooled under the iron hand of 50s Cool School revolutionary Lennie Tristano, Marsh had an oddly squawky sound. His barline-hopping legato runs and idiosyncratic originality can be heard in this fascinating collection of short, mostly home-recorded improvisations.

John Martyn

Bless the Weather (1971)

Prickly Scot John Martyn's fifth album, underpinned by Danny Thompson's supple double-bass, is the perfect fusion of jazz and folk. Suffused with the muzzy glow of an autumn sunset, it roams from the hash-scented Echoplex experimentation of Glistening Glyndebourne to the devotional bliss of Head and Heart.

Hugh Masekela

Stimela (1994)

One of the world's great horn players, Masekela pioneered his rousing fusion of South African township styles and jazz back in the apartheid era, then escaped to the US where these tracks

were recorded in the late 60s and 70s. They include his mellow hit *Grazin' in the Grass* and the title track, a soulful lament for South Africa's miners.

Souad Massi

Deb (Heart Broken) (2003)

When Souad Massi first moved from Algeria to France, she sounded like an exquisite folk-club diva, singing gently sad-edged, intimate ballads. Then came this album, adding north African influences and a dash of flamenco to songs that were more rousing and confident - but still dominated by that gloriously soulful voice.

Massive Attack

Blue Lines (1991)

Britain's "urban" music has always reflected a diverse multiculturalism, rather than the strictly delineated divides of the mainly American styles that influence it. *Blue Lines* threw soul, hip-hop, dub and jazz into the brew, and united hardcore fans, chattering class-dilettantes and old-school rap and soul fans for 40 minutes.

Mastodon

Blood Mountain (2006)

Mastodon exemplify modern trends in metal: precision and power. For all the trad-metal iconography of beasts and fire, *Blood Mountain* sometimes sounds like a post-rock album. Just a very, very loud one.

Derrick May

Innovator (1996)

Along with schoolfriends Kevin Saunderson and Juan Atkins, May was one of Detroit's "Belleville Three", pioneering a sleek variation on house soon known as techno. Including *Nude Photo* (which he recorded under the name Mayday) and *Strings of Life* (under another alias, Rhythim Is Rhythim), this collection showcases May's futuristic hi-tech soul.

Michael Mayer

Fabric 13 (2003)

The best dance mixes are like journeys, underpinned by the tension between where you go and how you get there. The key thread running through *Fabric 13* is the signature microhouse of Michael Mayer's Kompakt label: lush and minimal, with heavy emphasis on the emotions.

Curtis Mayfield

Superfly (1972)

The quintessential blaxploitation soundtrack, *Superfly* stands out even in as storied a career as Mayfield's. He locates the drama in the moral grey areas that the movie's pushers, pimps, users and victims swirl through - though his subtle, richly detailed lyrics sometimes fight a losing battle with some of the most vivid, coruscating funk music ever committed to tape.

Mazzy Star

So Tonight That I Might See (1993)

Mazzy Star's opiated fusion of blues, folk and country was best realised on this, the second of their three albums. It's a perfect 3am record: the melodies here are drowsier than on their debut, while Hope Sandoval's voice is entrancing. The album even provided the band with an alternative hit, courtesy of *Fade Into You*.

MC Solaar

Prose Combat (1994)

The best of the Senegal-born French rapper's seven albums. French speakers rave about the MC's literate, socially conscious rhymes (particularly on the intense, *Guernica*-citing *La*

Concubine de L'Hémoglobine). But you don't need to speak the lingo to fall for Prose Combat's warm, jazzy hooks and Solaar's sumptuous lyrical flow.

MC5

High Time (1971)

Kick Out the Jams might tell the story better, but High Time had the songs. That wig-flipping bluster is all there, but by now there is an incomparable set of chops, too - the fire and skill in some of the arrangements here are staggering. The Stooges for sheer bludgeoning power, the MC5 for their steam-train musicality - Detroit really did have that whole Rock City thing sewn up.

Paul McCartney and Wings

Band On the Run (1973)

Wings' hair-raising trip to Nigeria produced Paul McCartney's most successful solo album, which represented the only time Macca matched his artistic pretensions to his commercial leanings. Full-throttle hits Jet and the title track lie next to subtle gems Bluebird and Let Me Roll It, a song even John Lennon loved.

Kate and Anna McGarrigle

Kate and Anna McGarrigle (1975)

These days, Kate McGarrigle is best known as the mother of Rufus and Martha Wainwright, but she should be revered for her role in recording some of the most drop-dead gorgeous harmony songs in existence, along with her sister Anna. This set includes Kate's poignant (Talk to Me of) Mendocino, and Anna's exquisite Heart Like a Wheel.

Chris McGregor's Brotherhood of Breath

Chris McGregor's Brotherhood of Breath (1970)

No stranger to mixing things up, McGregor had already caused a stir in his native South Africa with his racially mixed band. When they moved to London, they added free jazz to the pot for this terrific LP. Filled with open-ended improv, but also joyful unison playing, it's a testament to how if you free your mind, your ass will indeed follow.

John McLaughlin

My Goal's Beyond (1971)

Yorkshire-born guitarist John McLaughlin made this album after his groundbreaking stints with Miles Davis and before the Mahavishnu Orchestra. One side is a stunning collection of solos and (overdubbed) duos, while the other is a world-jazz jam. The sound is relaxed - a priceless calm before the storm of fusion.

Jackie McLean

One Step Beyond (1963)

Even by 1963, Charlie Parker was still a hard saxophone act to follow. The fiery, soulful Jackie McLean was a Parker disciple, but this complex, hard-driving Ornette Coleman-influenced postbop was indeed a step beyond. Trombonist Grachan Moncur III, vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson and phenomenal teenage drummer Tony Williams are all of the same mind.

Meat Loaf

Bat Out of Hell (1977)

Between them, songwriter Jim Steinman and producer Todd Rundgren throw everything - kitchen sink, kitchen, most of the studio - into the first album to spawn a franchise. You can hear the Springsteen of Born to Run (two E-Streeters play on the album), but taken to such ludicrous extremes, lyrically and musically, as to be inimitable.

Joe Meek and the Blue Men

I Hear a New World - An Outer Space Music Fantasy (1960)

Before Joe Meek made his name with the Tornados' single Telstar, the pioneering producer's mastery of primitive electronics found an otherworldly home here. Surf guitars shudder around eerie voices, soupy faraway sounds and songs about globbots, bublights and space boats. Rock'n'roll has never sounded so intergalactic.

Brad Mehldau Trio

The Art of the Trio, Vol 4: Back at the Vanguard (1999)

This live recording sees pianist Mehldau shake off comparisons to Bill Evans and Keith Jarrett as he seems to bend space and time, lingering on phrases and riffs that amuse him. He turns All the Things You Are into a 7/4 geometric puzzle, and brutally deconstructs Radiohead's Exit Music (For a Film).

Mellow Candle

Swaddling Songs (1972)

A touchstone of British folk-rock, this Irish group's sole album is deeply atmospheric, with a rich production that most of their contemporaries weren't afforded. Clodagh Simmons' voice soars over flutes, mellotrons and tricky time changes. On songs such as Sheep Season, the effect is very much candlelit and swaddled.

Harold Melvin & the Bluenotes

The Best Of (1995)

Alongside the O'Jays, the Bluenotes were Gamble & Huff's uptempo Philadelphia Soul masters: The Love I Lost, Bad Luck and Where Are All My Friends are pre-disco staples. But they could do slow jams, too. If You Don't Know Me By Now and I Miss You are staggering showcases for the 22-year-old Teddy Pendergrass.

Mercury Rev

Deserters' Songs (1998)

The US art-rock collective's fourth record eschewed the noisy, discordant sounds of their previous work in favour of soft, otherworldly music that was both melodious and beautiful. Driven by bowed saws and lush strings, its dreamlike songs drift by on waves of wide-eyed wonderment and ethereal splendour.

Mestre Ambrosio Mestre Ambrosio (1996) Led by Sergio Veloso, Mestre Ambrosio were one of the great experimental Brazilian bands of the 90s. They came from Recife, in the north-east, and played a key role in the Mangue Bit movement, reviving and updating local styles such as forro, maracatu and ciranda with a rousing blend of chanting vocals, fiddles, percussion and electric guitar.

Metallica

Master of Puppets (1986)

It may be hard to believe, but before Napster and group therapy tarnished their lustre, Metallica were once the driving force behind the reinvention of heavy metal. This, their third album, was what put them there - an hour-long masterclass in punishing riffing without a tantrum in sight.

Pat Metheny

80/81 (1980)

Guitarist Pat Metheny is mainly praised for his catchy composing, and his slick Latin/country fusion band - but periodically he makes great, edgy jazz records. This one has bassist Charlie Haden's firm dignity and Jack DeJohnette's drum power, as well as fascinatingly contrasting saxophones in the Ornette-inspired Dewey Redman and the Coltrane-esque Michael Brecker.

MIA

Kala (2007)

Maya Arulpragasam's strategy of vacuuming up the shiniest, hookiest elements of music from around the globe took an ambitious leap forward on Kala. But beneath the sometimes gauche politics, the key to her success is the irresistible way her voice curls itself around rhymes and slogans with a louche, addictive confidence.

George Michael

Faith (1987)

Faith was evidence of Michael's physical and emotional transition from Wham! heartthrob to fully formed adult songwriter. Amazingly accomplished - Michael, just 24, was producer and arranger as well as songwriter - the album was accessible yet substantial, and opened his solo career with a bang he has never quite equalled since.

Midnight Cowboy

OST (1969)

There is John Barry's mournful, harmonica-led title theme, of course, and Nilsson's alone-in-a-crowd classic Everybody's Talkin'. But there is also the music that soundtracked Joe and Ratso's short-lived adventures in the New York party scene. Elephant's Memory, later to become John Lennon's backing band, bring the oddball psych-pop.

The Mighty Diamonds

Right Time (1976)

With their chaste vocals wedded to the nerveless punch of elite Jamaican backing group the Revolutionaries, The Mighty Diamonds had a sleek roots-reggae sound that invoked the precision of US soul ensembles such as the Temptations and the Delfonics. Right Time deals in major-key spirituality - Rasta anguish so blissfully harmonised that redemption feels inevitable.

The Millennium

Begin (1968)

Helmed by soft-pop genius Curt Boettcher, a producer even Brian Wilson was in awe of, the Millennium were a studio supergroup so productive that even the material cut from this debut later made a pretty great album (Again). Anyone who digs the Beach Boys or the Association would love this, too.

Steve Miller Band

Fly Like an Eagle (1976)

Miller and the gang made some of the most fun and creative big-time rock of several eras, from their psychedelic late-60s beginnings to frolicky pop-rock in the 80s. This is a particular sweet spot, where a bit of light space-cowboy experimentation meets FM radio-rock expertise. Hit after ravishing hit ensues, with hooks, wit and charm to spare.

Jeff Mills

Live at the Liquid Rooms, Tokyo (1996)

Detroit's Jeff Mills may be the world's most celebrated techno DJ. This audio vérité recording, complete with audience noise and the odd fluffed mix, explains why: there's a primal, instinctual energy in the way he frantically cuts between records, allowing barely any track to last more than two minutes, utterly at odds with techno's austere, cerebral reputation.

Charles Mingus

Tijuana Moods (1957)

Mingus's Mexican "concept album" demonstrates jazz composition of the highest order, where improvisation - however wild or sublime - becomes an integral part of the scores, full of complex part-writing, extended harmonies and constant variation of tempo and feel.

Kylie Minogue

Ultimate Kylie (2004)

Kylie has never made a great studio album, but, as this career-spanning collection proves, she has always had a knack for releasing tremendous pop singles. From the early PWL days, via the better-than-you-remember mid-career reinventions to her Parlophone-sponsored renaissance, Ultimate Kylie underlines Minogue's lasting impact on British pop.

Minor Threat

Complete Discography (1988)

The brief but fiery career of hardcore punk's founding fathers is compiled on this one CD. Those early-80s singles, recorded with a minimum of technology, still sound brutal today, and Ian Mackaye's straight-edge message - no drink, no drugs, no casual sex - helped define alternative music's sense of opposition to the mainstream. The final single, Salad Days, probably invented emo, too.

Minutemen

Double Nickels on the Dime (1984)

Singular heroes of US indie-rock's early wave, San Pedro's Minutemen were among those peeling off from hardcore punk (alongside Sonic Youth, Hüsker Dü etc) to broaden out the radical end of rock. Their jazzy, skittery noise is ingenious, and for their unique spirit of independence, humour, politics and poetry, they remain an unmatched inspiration.

Misty in Roots

Live at the Counter Eurovision (1979)

Devout Rastafarians from Southall, these Rock Against Racism stalwarts represented the militant tendency of British roots reggae. With a righteous introduction from MC Smokes, this mesmeric live performance puts tough rhythms and sonorous keyboards to the fore, alongside the exhortations of the Tyson brothers. Dread power at its finest.

Joni Mitchell

The Hissing of Summer Lawns (1975)

Dismissed at the time as difficult, this ambitious, experimental blend of jazz and folk is Mitchell's most fully realised album. Casting a sharp but not unsympathetic eye over bohemia and suburbia alike, she captures the louche decadence of the time and the heart of darkness under the surface.

Mobb Deep

The Infamous (1995)

West-coast gangsta rap is a high-life fantasy of blunts and booty, but in the half-lit world of Queens MCs Prodigy and Havoc (aka Mobb Deep), weed makes you paranoid, money makes you enemies and hell is always just around the corner. Their second album is a rivetingly claustrophobic urban nightmare.

Moby

Play (1999)

There's no doubt that Moby's fifth album was tainted by its association with TV adverts after every track was licensed, often to less-than-popular corporations. But, judged purely on its songs, Play remains a wonderful coming together of old blues samples, emotionally charged dance music and sure-footed pop hooks.

The Modern Jazz Quartet

The Artistry Of (1991)

With its tuxedos, classical borrowings and oblique use of the blues, the MJQ made friends way outside jazz with these early-50s recordings. Purists disliked it, but it was a quiet crossover

revolution. Superb themes by pianist John Lewis, and sweepingly inventive improv from vibraphonist Milt Jackson (who gives a fragile instrument immense strength), feature on these early sessions.

The Modern Lovers

The Modern Lovers (1976)

If you want defiance of prevailing orthodoxy, look no further than this compilation of 1972 demos. Jonathan Richman denounced drugs (I'm Straight), eulogised true love over sex (Someone I Care About) and celebrated the romance of the mundane (The Modern World), while behind him the Modern Lovers roared with proto-punk power.

Nils Petter Molvaer

Khmer (1997)

The Norwegian trumpeter's tone certainly nods towards Miles Davis, but it is draped in an electronic shroud that is equal parts post-rock, ambient electronica, dub and jungle. This ECM release created a blueprint for a new brand of Nordic (post) jazz that would become hugely influential.

The Moments

Love on a Two-Way Street (1997)

Best known here for their proto-disco hit Girls, the Moments - a New Jersey vocal group who formed in 1968 - specialised in exquisitely grainy soul mini-symphonies such as What's Your Name?. They're all on this two-disc set, many of them written and produced by Sylvia "Pillow Talk" Robinson, who helped launch rap with Sugarhill Records.

Monica

The Boy Is Mine (1998)

Although it was predated by Aaliyah/Timbaland, the title track, a No 2 hit in 1998, was Britain's first taste of the hyper-syncopated R&B that would soon dominate the US and UK charts. With production by Dallas Austin and Rodney Jerkins, and a guest appearance from OutKast, this set the template for 21st-century soul.

Thelonius Monk

Brilliant Corners (1956)

The hammer-and-anvil sound of Monk's piano chords, his hopping, crabwise runs and inimitably vinegary compositions are among the most enduring landmarks of 20th-century music. Even classical recitalists play Monk now, and his work is so full of promise for interpreters that its profile is always rising. Monk was one of the architects of the 40s bebop movement, but so much his own man that critics wrangled over whether he counted as a bopper or not - his piano style was a dismantled and dissonant version of early stride piano, his feel was bluesy and soulful; his harmonic sense seemed designed to turn expected resolutions upside down, and he disliked bop's seamless legato runs. Brilliant Corners was an astonishing mid-career development from Monk's move to the New York label Riverside. The company had tried to persuade the - idiosyncratic artist to explore saleable Ellington at first, but this December 1956 set is pure Monk. The title track was so convoluted and structured, with its stuttery tempo-changes, that in the end it had to be stitched together out of 24 takes. Pannonica, and the only non-original, I Surrender, Dear, add a sinister edge to the ballad form. Bemsha Swing is a classically bumpy Monk almost-groover, and Ba-Lue Bolivar Ba-Lues-Are shows how ingeniously Monk could prise open the closed shape of a blues. These sessions were fractious, not helped by Monk's assumption that his fiendish pieces should be easy to play. But the outcome - audible tape-splices and all - is one of the great episodes of recorded jazz. John Fordham

The Monkees

Head (1968)

The film that killed their career spawned the Monkees' best music. Looking back, it seems

obvious that they could never have gained the credibility they craved at the time. But if this album - which spans folk-pop, garage rock and the gorgeous ersatz psych of *The Porpoise Song* - had been the work of a group with a greater reputation, it would have been critically worshipped.

Yves Montand

Montand Chante Prévert (1962)

One of the lesser-known delights of the chanson tradition, this luminous album collects 15 songs and poems by Jacques Prévert and sets them to music as sweet and evocative as a madeleine. By turns playful and thoughtful, Montand's voice is so expressive that French knowledge isn't necessary to adore every word.

Wes Montgomery

The Incredible Jazz Guitar Of (1960)

Like his disciple, George Benson, guitarist Montgomery was a natural improviser who eventually just recycled hit licks on the designer-funk route. But guitarists revere Montgomery, and this - his most thrilling jazz set, with great bop piano from Tommy Flanagan - shows why, with its Django Reinhardt octave runs and effortlessly fresh spontaneous melody.

Christy Moore

At the Point, Live (1994)

A glorious soulful performer who can switch from serious political songs to whimsy and comedy, Christy Moore is best experienced playing live, and this solo set, recorded in his home city of Dublin, shows off his extraordinary range, from the poignant *Missing You* and exquisite *Cliffs of Dooneen* to the delightful *Delerium Tremens*.

Beny Moré

La Coleccion Cubana (1998)

Known as *El Barbaro de Ritmo* - the wild man of rhythm - Beny Moré dominated Cuban music in the 40s and 50s, and helped to create the current salsa style with his flamboyant performances and powerful, versatile vocals. These recordings are mostly from the late 50s, and show his extraordinary range, from cool, crooned ballads to driving, infectious dance songs.

Lee Morgan

The Sidewinder (1963)

Best known for its bold, funky title track - a jittery boogaloo that can still fill dancefloors - this also features four other vivid, angular slices of razor-sharp hard bop. The pugnacious 25-year-old trumpeter Morgan plays tight harmonies with tenor saxophonist Joe Henderson as Billy Higgins's drums fizz and crackle around them.

Giorgio Moroder

E=MC2 (1979)

E=MC2 is an album of sequencer-driven, computerised disco, of the sort Moroder pioneered with Donna Summer's *I Feel Love*. Hailed as the first "live-to-digital" record, it's a feat of synchronised programming and performing. And the trail-blazing producer, with his electronically tweaked falsetto, sounds like a space-age Bee Gee singing proto-techno robo-pop.

Artists beginning with M (part 2)

Tuesday November 20, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Ennio Morricone

Mondo Morricone (1996)

We all know the dramatic Sergio Leone scores, but this collection of Morricone's incidental music from cult Italian movies made between 1968-1972 sees him in a kitscher mood, casually pastiching Burt Bacharach and John Barry, and sounding funky as hell.

Van Morrison

It's Too Late to Stop Now (1974)

Gleaned from several live performances in 1973, and named after Cyprus Avenue's final flourishing cry of "It's too late to stop now!", this thunders through tracks such as Into the Mystic, I've Been Working, and Domino, showcasing impeccable musicianship from the Caledonia Soul Orchestra. Morrison sings like a man on fire.

Jelly Roll Morton

The Complete Recorded Works 1926-30 (2000)

Morton, the first great jazz composer and a travelling piano star, insisted that he invented jazz. Untrue, but these pieces, many featuring his Red Hot Peppers band, rival Louis Armstrong's contemporaneous Hot Fives. In their vivacious themes, varied rhythms, and narrative and collective strength, they are the apogee of pre-swing jazz.

Teedra Moses

Complex Simplicity (2004)

Teedra Moses' voice leaps out at you first - a forthright instrument of stunning clarity. Then the crisp, sparse sound, steeped in classic R&B without ever becoming retro. And finally, the lyrics: poetic, evocative, generous and above all wise. Moese opens her heart about her troubles and desires, and finds salvation in working through them.

Motörhead

No Sleep Til Hammersmith (1981)

From its title on down, this makes a case for the rock tour as heroic crusade - as Metallica later put it, "Another town/ Another gig/ Again we will explode..." On this album, recorded in 1980, Lemmy's trio don't so much play to the crowd as play through them, with Ace of Spades their devastating coup de grâce.

Mott The Hoople

The Ballad of Mott - A Retrospective (1993)

Best known for their David Bowie-penned smash All the Young Dudes, Mott's self-written hits are just as great. Frontman Ian Hunter was a brilliant observer of the pop experience - his songs are fascinating, raucous snapshots of motorway life, all back-biting, star-struck kids and imploding heroes.

The Move

The Move (1968)

Although the Move's Flowers in the Rain was famously the first song played on Radio 1, their debut is a sadly overlooked psychedelic pop masterpiece. Fire Brigade and Weekend smell of patchouli oil and Swinging London, and you can hear the beginnings of Roy Wood's multi-tracked later output with ELO and Wizzard.

The Gerry Mulligan Quartet

The Original Quartet With Chet Baker (1998)

The James Dean-like trumpeter/crooner Baker lost much of his playing life to heroin, but this is his landmark work, recorded in 1952/53 with saxophonist Gerry Mulligan. Baker's pure long notes and Gerry Mulligan's undulating sax curl around each other in hushed counterpoint, in one of the most innovative groups of the 50s Cool Jazz period.

Artists beginning with M (part 3)

Wednesday November 21, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Junior Murvin

Police and Thieves (1977)

The Clash might have subsequently dressed the title cut in bondage trousers, but Murvin's outwardly benign original version sharply scored the Notting Hill riots of the previous long hot summer. These 10 cuts - all narrated in that easy falsetto - overturn any attempts to paint him as a one-track pony.

Muse

Black Holes and Revelations (2006)

Some missed the sense of humour, others the politics (Assassin advocates knocking off politicians), but Muse's never-better songwriting shines like a supernova. Angry, flamboyant and unapologetically excessive, it's the best arena- electro-glam-pop-protest-rock space opera ever made. Wembley Stadium awaited them.

My Bloody Valentine

Isn't Anything (1988)

Back in the mid-80s, My Bloody Valentine seemed set for a permanent tenure in the indie second division. But somehow they reinvented themselves, making this massively influential album. Surrounded by feral guitar noise, their diffident and erotic boy and girl singers sounded as if they were being menaced by the very monster they had created.

Mya

Fear of Flying (2000)

An uptown alternative to Kelis' boho avant-urban pop, Mya's second album, a loose concept about love's travails featuring staccato beats courtesy of Swizz Beatz and Rodney Jerkins, confirmed this as a new golden age for R&B. Her lightly melismatic vocals suited these rhythmically tricky tales, capturing perfectly the highly charged sadness of a dead affair.

Mylo

Destroy Rock'n'Roll (2004)

Growing up on the Isle of Skye, a young Myles MacInnes could only successfully tune into the AOR sounds of Atlantic 252 radio. This formative pop influence coupled with his love of techno clubs on the mainland produced a winning hybrid that even Elton John evangelised for.

Artists beginning with N

Wednesday November 21, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

N*E*R*D

In Search Of (2001)

The funk-rock side-project of hegemonic R&B producers the Neptunes, N*E*R*D saw Pharrell

Williams and Chad Hugo prove themselves not just as producers but as songwriters whose stylistic range recalled peak Stevie Wonder. The album was rerecorded in 2002, with the electronic backing replaced by live performances, but this is the definitive version.

Youssou N'Dour
Immigres (1988)

N'Dour transformed the Senegalese music scene with his furious, percussion-based mbalax dance songs. He has experimented, not always successfully, with a wide range of styles in his lengthy career but was surely at his best with this early mbalax set, with its blend of talking drums, soaring, passionate vocals, and a title track dealing with the problems of Africans in Europe.

Nas
Illmatic (1994)

Illmatic had a finger in every hip-hop pie. It was impeccably produced by some of the genre's big names. But the key to its success was Nas's impeccable flow - he could drop Malcolm X and bisexuality into his rhymes and still cut a convincing gangsta. So good was Illmatic that it has overshadowed the rest of Nas's considerable career.

Natural Born Killers
OST (1994)

Tasked with matching the nightmarish sensory overload of Oliver Stone's serial-killer satire, Trent Reznor outdid himself. There has never been a soundtrack like it. A violent, hallucinatory road trip through the madness of America, with Leonard Cohen, L7, Patsy Cline and Dr Dre along for the ride.

The Necks
Drive By (2003)

This Australian trio make a kind of trance music that defines its own sensual world: keyboards, bass and drums meld in hour-long, improvised performances that are like nothing else. Their music can be edgy and intellectually satisfying, yet it's also totally gorgeous. Dive in and enjoy.

Fred Neil
Fred Neil (Everybody's Talkin') (1966)

Though perhaps best known thanks to cover versions of his songs - Nilsson's take on his Everybody's Talkin'; Tim Buckley's of Dolphins - Neil's own interpretations are hard to beat. Possessed of a huge voice, as well as a sly sense of humour, this asks you to pay court to true folk royalty.

Oliver Nelson
Blues and the Abstract Truth (1961)

There's a "truth to materials" about saxophonist Nelson's modernist charts - this is the guy who still haunts young musicians with his Patterns for Saxophones - but he could write radio-friendly jazz tunes, too. And he had the knack of picking the right musicians, such as Freddie Hubbard, drummer Roy Haynes and the magnificent Eric Dolphy.

Willie Nelson
Red Headed Stranger (1975)

Minuscule of budget yet grand in vision, Red Headed Stranger is a loose concept album based around the story of a runaway preacher, "wild in his sorrow" with a heart as "heavy as night". It was a career-defining record, belatedly transforming Nelson the A-list songwriter into Nelson the A-list performer.

The Neon Philharmonic**The Moth Confesses** (1969)

From a brief, post-Sgt Pepper period when pop seemed to have truly become adult. The red meat of this concept album by eccentric songwriter Tupper Saussy (imagine a cross between Jimmy Webb and Frasier Crane) was an affair between a businessman and a younger girl - she gets chucked in the last song.

The Neptunes**Present ... Clones** (2003)

A victory lap for the production duo who pretty much defined pop during the decade's first half, before Pharrell's ego got the better of him. Whether the featured vocalist is a marquee name (Busta Rhymes) or a newcomer (Roscoe P Coldchain), the star is always the Neptunes' spartan digital funk.

Neu!**Neu! 75** (1975)

Talk about yin and yang. On the verge of break-up, the two halves of the fantastically influential Krautrock duo point out why their partnership has run its course. Guitar/keyboard man Michael Rother's three songs are melancholy, crystalline and composed; drums/vocals/whatever fella Klaus Dinger replies with music that anticipates the nihilistic Götterdämmerung of punk.

Neutral Milk Hotel**In the Aeroplane Over the Sea** (1998)

In the US, it's seen as one of the great alternative LPs; in the UK, it's barely known. In this instance, the Americans are right. Neutral Milk Hotel's second and final album is equal parts religion and psychedelia, a fuzzy testament that haunts and lingers.

New Colony Six**Attacking a Straw Man** (1969)

Most garage bands, like punk groups a decade later, struggled to evolve. This Chicago act manoeuvred from Farfisa-fed trash (I Confess) into softer, harmonised territory, flitting between the dewy (Blue Eyes), the trippy (Sun Within You), and tearful Americana (Prairie Grey) on their final album.

New Order**Substance** (1987)

A superb sashay through one of British pop's most sublime catalogues, this collection outlines New Order's progression from scratchy post-punk uncertainty (Ceremony) through glacial electro classicism (Blue Monday, Thieves Like Us) and on to euphoric, disco-fied pop (True Faith). A copy of 1989's Technique, though, is its essential companion.

New York Dolls**New York Dolls** (1973)

A bunch of hulking glam tarts, staggering around in platforms and squeezed into satin strides - by their own admission, the New York Dolls lowered the bar within the rock industry with their debut album. And for that we should be grateful, as their brash brand of rock'n'roll was an efficacious antidote to the excesses of prog rock.

Joanna Newsom**Ys** (2006)

An exceptionally ambitious 55-minute, five-track concept album of baroque folk, bursting with gloriously intricate harp-playing, glossy strings and peerless poetry. Newsom's otherworldly soprano is simultaneously innocent, erotic and tragic, drawing you into the album's glorious mysteries.

Roger Nichols & the Small Circle of Friends

Roger Nichols & the Small Circle of Friends (1968)

The epitome of the A&M sound. Lush arrangements buoy note-perfect, emotive boy-girl harmonies on titles such as Goffin and King's Snow Queen and a clutch of love songs by Nichols and Tony Asher, Brian Wilson's co-writer on Pet Sounds. In many ways, this is that teenage landmark's twentysomething successor.

Nico

The Marble Index (1969)

Former Velvet Underground chanteuse Nico's aloof vocals and primitive harmonium are augmented here by John Cale on production and multi-instrumental duties. The Marble Index is austere and ancient-sounding, tinged with sadness and melancholy; Evenings of Light really does sound like the soundtrack to the "unlit end of time".

Harry Nilsson

Aerial Ballet (1968)

Nilsson's debut had endeared him to the Beatles - a relationship that, with Lennon, staggered on into the 70s - and his second continues to fascinate now. A beautiful singer, but also a songwriter of surreal accomplishment (see Good Old Desk), Nilsson brought a sense of vaudevillian showmanship to rock music that sometimes prized enlightenment over entertainment.

Nine Inch Nails

Pretty Hate Machine (1989)

Trent Reznor was industrial music's first pin-up, welding machine-tooled riffs and death-disco synths to glossy black melodies and an adolescent moral absolutism: Everyone lies! Love is a fraud! Compromise is corruption!, etc. He's still at it in his 40s, but his debut has the righteous clarity and melodrama of youth.

Nirvana [US]

MTV Unplugged in New York (1994)

Nirvana seemed to be made for amplification, but their Unplugged set - released after Kurt Cobain's death - sheds new light on them. We meet Cobain the fan, displayed over six covers. We see the clever pop structures in their originals, stripped of their electric roar. And in Leadbelly's Where Did You Sleep Last Night?, we seem to get a glimpse into Cobain's anguished heart.

Nirvana [UK]

The Story of Simon Simopath (1967)

Predating the Zombies' Odessey & Oracle, this was an early example of baroque pop. The debut by the British Nirvana featured super-pretty chamber-style orchestral arrangements by Sid Dale, who worked with Scott Walker, and was arguably the first concept album. The breathtakingly beautiful opener, Wings of Love, remains a highlight of the era.

Stina Nordenstam

Dynamite (1996)

Harsh, gritty guitars crackle and rumble, as if the sound is being forced into the open; occasionally, baroque orchestral arrangements break through. Nordenstam herself is suspended above the clanking industrial arrangements as if in stasis, her high-pitched timbre giving the impression that the edge of despair is the most natural place to be.

Norma Jean

Norma Jean (1978)

Norma Jean Wright sang lead vocals on Chic's 1977 debut, and this, featuring club favourite

Saturday, was the first extracurricular glacial-disco project by the Chic Organisation, with production from Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers, with the Chic house band behind her.

The Notorious BIG

Ready to Die (1994)

His 1997 murder gave Christopher Wallace's debut an extra resonance it hardly needed. An astoundingly sure-footed concept album, it tells the story of a small-time criminal from birth to suicide. Biggie's eye for detail, remarkable conversational flow and dazzling beats make this one of the hip-hop classics.

NWA

Straight Outta Compton (1989)

There had been rap records that talked about gang crime in lurid, first-person detail before, but this combination of Public Enemy-influenced noisy beats and lyrics of violence painted in garish verbal colours opened the floodgates. Eazy-E and his cohorts claimed their work was street reportage, but their cartoonish excess was also darkly, devilishly funny.

Laura Nyro

New York Tendaberry (1969)

There was no one like Laura Nyro, and there still isn't. A Bronx child who grew up in the 50s and 60s with the echoes of doo-wop groups in her head and the cool sounds of New York jazz stations on the radio, she found a space in music no one else would ever occupy. New York Tendaberry was the third of her 10 studio albums, and the one that plunged most audaciously into the core of her vision and artistry. As a teenager, she had written Wedding Bell Blues for the Fifth Dimension, And When I Die for Blood, Sweat and Tears, and Stoney End for Barbra Streisand. By the time she came to make New York Tendaberry, however, it was clear that her ambitions lay beyond the Top 40. All its songs were recorded solo at the piano, allowing her to shape the tempos and the shading to the demands of her extraordinary lyrics, sometimes employing dynamic contrasts so dramatic that they could be disconcerting. Then she and her arranger, Jimmie Haskell, added orchestrations to suit each mood: sometimes brazen, sometimes so subtle they were almost invisible - a brush of cymbals, a distant bell. Her remarkable voice was capable of articulating the extremes of experience already accumulated in her young life, heightened by a ceaselessly fertile imagination. At a time when rock's aristocracy were emigrating to the comforts of Laurel Canyon, Nyro swam against the tide and produced her most intense, demanding and disquieting work, a song cycle untainted by compromise and bursting with a poetic gift that still astonishes. She was just 21. Richard Williams

Artists beginning with O

Wednesday November 21, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

OST (2000)

The Coen brothers' comedy, released in 2000, ended up sparking a huge revival of interest in "old-time" music, thanks to its soundtrack, produced by T-Bone Burnett. Burnett drew upon US folk music history, with bluegrass, blues and gospel, excerpts from Alan Lomax's field recordings and appearances by Gillian Welch, Alison Krauss and John Hartford.

Mary Margaret O'Hara

Miss America (1988)

Toronto singer-songwriter O'Hara is many things (most of them prefaced by the words "enigmatic" or "eccentric"), but a prolific maker of records she isn't. Miss America remains her only proper album to date - but what an absorbing listen it still is, her distinctive vocal phrasing shimmering with beauty.

The O'Jays

Back Stabbers (1972)

Produced by Gamble & Huff, with string arrangements by Thom Bell, Back Stabbers is a landmark of uptempo Philly Soul, with the title track and Love Train the hardy proto-disco perennials. But on Who Am I and Listen to the Clock on the Wall, the vocal group reached new deep-soul heights.

Oasis

Definitely Maybe (1994)

"It's just rock'n'roll," snarled Liam Gallagher repeatedly at the end of the opening track, Rock'n'Roll Star. And so it was. But it was brilliant rock'n'roll that ignited and defined a generation with its ambition, its swagger and, particularly, its tunes. Few debuts are better.

Phil Ochs

Rehearsals for Retirement (1969)

"You're not a singer, you're a journalist," was Dylan's put-down of militant buddy Ochs in 1965. By 1969, though, Ochs - who took Vietnam and Nixon very personally - was writing the more poetic odes to the death of the American dream. The title was no gag, either - one more album and he was gone.

Ohio Players

Skin Tight (1974)

The seventh album by the Dayton, Ohio, funk-soul brothers represented a turning point as the R&B band incorporated jazz and disco elements. But mainly they excelled at Family Stone/Funkadelic-style dirty funk jams, enhanced by synths and horns.

Omni Trio

The Deepest Cut (1995)

During the mid-90s, drum'n'bass's quest for new sounds moved as fast as its hyper-agile rhythms. Jazz odysseys swiftly followed, but Omni Trio's Rob Haigh maintained a love for the helium rush of rave. His collection of early singles wraps rattling beats (the key track is called Renegade Snares) and timestretched vocals in lush, bittersweet textures.

One Blood

In Love (1981)

Long-forgotten purveyors of early 80s London Lovers Rock, Blackheath's One Blood here produced an acknowledged classic from a genre usually notorious for great 12-inch sides. But with All in the Game and the dub-lite version of Bacharach/David's A House Is Not a Home, this was a consistently fine album of rocksteady romance.

The Only Ones

The Only Ones (1978)

Frontman Peter Perrett was living the Pete Doherty lifestyle long before the Libertine, but found time to add his trademark narcotic drawl to John Perry's skyscraping fretwork in songs as stratospheric as Another Girl, Another Planet. If Babysambles sounded like this, they'd fill stadiums.

Orange Juice

You Can't Hide Your Love Forever (1982)

The missing link between Buzzcocks and the Smiths, Orange Juice forged a new kind of forlorn, funk-inflected, romantic guitar-pop, with singer Edwyn Collins a new kind of fey, self-debunking male indie frontman. This follow-up to the groundbreaking jangle-singles for the Postcard label was by turns sad and soaring, but always brilliant.

The Orb

The Orb's Adventures Beyond the Ultraworld (1991)

The Orb's debut saw Alex Paterson justify his reputation as the stoned mad scientist of acid house via a two-hour comedown journey through dub, Chicago house beats and quirky samples. Little Fluffy Clouds was sublimely trippy, but it was Back Side of the Moon that tipped the necessary wink to Pink Floyd.

Roy Orbison

Love Songs (2001)

Although Roy Orbison's classic 1960s weepies are rerecorded in late-1980s versions on this double CD, the passing years hadn't dimmed the Big O's quavering voice or weakened the power of his emoting. Features duets with KD Lang and Emmylou Harris, career-resurrecting hits You Got It and I Drove All Night, plus rarities.

Orchestra Baobab

Specialist in All Styles (2002)

Until the arrival of Youssou N'Dour and his frantic mbalax style in the 80s, Orchestra Baobab dominated the Dakar music scene with their fine harmonies and blend of Latin and African styles. Invited to reform after a break of 16 years, they sounded as fresh and engaging as ever - and this time around, the quality of their recordings was vastly improved.

Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark

Architecture and Morality (1981)

After Enola Gay, the perkiest song about a nuclear holocaust ever written, OMD's third album was a grander affair, full of blissfully stylish, futuristic pop. Vocal drones, icy synthesizers and the warm tones of a mellotron swung the mood between eerie dystopian futurism and heightened euphoria.

Original Dixieland Jazz Band

Sensation! (1994)

Historic first-ever jazz recordings (the earliest are from 1917), from the young white New Orleans band that absorbed early black jazz and documented it. It's brash, raucous, and the novelty effects are dated. That said, the ODJB does sound like a bunch of talented what-the-hell youths sensing they're on to something amazing.

Orpheus

Orpheus (1971)

Originally proteges of producer Alan Lorber, Boston's Orpheus had escaped the limitations of Lorber's self-styled "Bosstown Sound" by their final album: songs such as I'll Be There are less soft-pop trifles than companions to the swooning existential balladry of Scott Walker's early solo albums.

Beth Orton

Central Reservation (1999)

Known as the "comedown queen" thanks to her tripped-out Chemical Brothers collaborations, Beth Orton's second solo record prioritised Brit folk over her previous dalliances with electronica.

Opener Stolen Car is a perfect rough-and-ready counterpart to the dreamy Pass in Time and alt.country-tinged Love Like Laughter.

Os Mutates

Everything Is Possible: The Best Of (1999)

Two Brazilian brothers called Sergio and Arnaldo fall for the Beatles and develop their own wobbly, bossa-tinged brand of psychedelic pop. They get Rita Lee to sing, they plug their guitars through sewing machines, they cause riots, they go mad. David Byrne's compilation of their 1968-72 peak is the glorious result.

Mike Osborne

Outback (1970)

Alto saxist Osborne's searing tone, distraught-sounding upper register ascents and sudden freefalls made him the English Eric Dolphy or Jackie McLean. Outback catches his tense vitality on a teeming, tumbling, sometimes ferocious session, featuring fiery South Africans Louis Moholo on drums, Chris McGregor on piano and Harry Miller on bass.

Greg Osby

Banned in New York (1998)

Restlessly dynamic saxophonist Osby was in on the 80s free-funk M-Base movement, and has also checked out hip-hop and rap. This punchy set includes a young Jason Moran on piano, and follows a jazz line from Ornette Coleman back to Charlie Parker, with Parker and Sonny Rollins themes among the classic materials trenchantly reworked.

Shuggie Otis

Inspiration Information (1974)

At 15, Shuggie Otis jammed with Al Kooper on the Super Sessions. By 22, he had retired from music. Three of those years were spent writing, arranging, performing and singing every note of this psychedelic masterpiece himself. A strange, beautiful trip worthy of Sly Stone, Stevie Wonder or George Clinton.

OutKast

Stankonia (2000)

The fourth album by this Atlanta, Georgia duo, comprising archetypal playa-hustler Big Boi and alien androgen Andre 3000, was a veritable cornucopia of rap and funk delights. The hit singles So Fresh, So Clean, Ms Jackson and B.O.B. (Bombs Over Baghdad) were just the start of this 24-track hip-hop odyssey.

Artists beginning with P

Wednesday November 21, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Augustus Pablo

King Tubbys Meets Rockers Uptown (1976)

Dub reggae is so closely woven into the fabric of popular music that without it, entire genres would not exist. Dub messes with pop's rhythmic and textural DNA, and disco, hip-hop, electronica - even what passes for challenging 21st-century rock - all use its techniques. Osbourne Ruddock, aka King Tubby, is the closest dub has to an inventor, and Horace Swaby, aka Augustus Pablo, was one of the first Jamaican producers to routinely employ Tubby's remix skills, so their partnership here explains why this album represents a pivotal moment in modern

music. King Tubbys Meets Rockers Uptown is a compilation of Tubby's mixes of tracks originally produced by Pablo and released as singles. Typically, Tubby's instrumental version of an A-side was found on the flip. Yet the pair's most celebrated work, this album's title track, was so seismic it has long since eclipsed the song it was based on, Baby I Love You So by Jacob Miller. In Tubby's mix, Miller's impassioned voice drifts in and out like a haunted soul in a psychic cul-de-sac, tormented by the remarkable barrage of Carlton Barrett's doubled-up drumming and Pablo's mournful melodica. The latter was a trademark element of Pablo's "Far East" sound, featuring on his own minor-key instrumental takes on early rocksteady classics such as Swing Easy, the source of this album's Skanking Dub. Though King Tubby's skills as a manipulator of sound distinguish dub as a concept, it is Pablo's production and musicianship that give these tracks their transcendent energy. The reverberations of this supreme meeting, blissful and thrilling, shall surely echo through space and time for ever. Keith Cameron

Palace Brothers

There Is No-One What Will Take Care of You (1993)

Will Oldham's unnerving, fragile debut revealed his astounding lyrical gift and his preoccupation with darkness, lust and sin. "God is one's corpus, and Jesus one's blood," he sings in (I Was Drunk at the) Pulpit. New gothic country starts here.

Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective

Wátina (2007)

This is a sturdy album of hymns, laments and protest songs, and also an intriguing history lesson. The Garifuna people are descended from escaped African slaves who mixed with local Carib people, and are now scattered across central America. Palacio, from Belize, is their best-known performer, and this soulful, rhythmic set is a powerful introduction.

Robert Palmer

Sneakin' Sally Through the Alley (1974)

The MTV lothario was once a credible blue-eyed soul man. His solo debut had all the right credentials: recorded in New Orleans, it found the Yorkshire Ferry backed by the Meters and Little Feat's Lowell George, crooning a set of funky originals and covers of songs by George and Allen Toussaint.

Panda Bear

Person Pitch (2007)

You could easily let it pass you by: Person Pitch seems like so many jumbled sounds until you pay close attention, and the luxuriant melodies and careful textures start to take hold. More straightforward, perhaps, than Noah Lennox's work with Animal Collective, but filled with a sense of wonder that does not cloy.

Charlie Parker

Charlie Parker on Dial: The Complete Sessions (1993)

Miles Davis said the four words "Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker" told the story of jazz. A young Davis, Dizzy Gillespie and others join saxophone genius Parker on these essential mid-40s recordings; timeless themes such as Ornithology and Yardbird Suite, inspired improvising and radical vision make these epochal episodes in modern music.

Evan Parker

50th Birthday Concert (1994)

The UK's globally acclaimed Evan Parker has invented a unique sax language, using split notes, non-chromatic lines, birdsong- and violin-like sounds, mimicry of electronic noise and more. This finely detailed set features two trios, one including imaginative German pianist Alex von Schlippenbach and drummer Paul Lovens.

Gram Parsons

Grievous Angel (1973)

Gram Parsons' ambition was to create what he called "cosmic American music", and the last recordings he made before his death fulfilled his ambition. Grievous Angel encompasses heartworn balladry, raucous hoedowns and, in Return of the Grievous Angel, a hallucinatory journey through country music from Cheyenne to Tennessee.

Jaco Pastorius

Word of Mouth (1981)

The debut album knocked everyone sideways, but the impressive follow-up never got its due. The "world's greatest bass player" applied his monster talent to big band writing and triumphed with great blowing, breathtaking virtuosity, rich orchestral hues, great tunes and grooves - built around Jaco's peerless mastery of the fretless bass.

Billy Paul

360 Degrees of Billy Paul (1972)

Philadelphia soul singer Billy Paul was 37 when he finally made it, under the wing of do-no-wrong hitmakers Gamble and Huff. 360 Degrees is as well-rounded as its title, with Am I Black Enough for You?'s punchy radicalism, Me and Mrs Jones's slowburning ode to infidelity and a euphoric rendition of Elton John's Your Song.

Pavement

Slanted and Enchanted (1992)

A shy album bristling with self-assurance, Pavement's debut shrouded its shrewd lyrics in slacker nonchalance and fractured its taut, sweet melodies into shards. With such a fascinating knot of contradictions at heart, no wonder Slanted and Enchanted galvanised the 1990s indie scene, and still sounds icy-fresh and incendiary today.

Peaches

The Teaches of Peaches (2000)

The debut from this Canadian rapper-singer is confrontational and vulgar, perching on the line that separates feminism and filth. Tracks such as Fuck the Pain Away and Diddle My Skittle are danceable, in a Teutonic electro-disco way, and provocative. Men are the quarry - but is she a benevolent gamekeeper or a vengeful hunter?

Penetration

Moving Targets (1978)

Penetration's debut alienated their punk following, but, looking back now, it documented the tensions of the era. They were Tyneside punks with a heavy metal guitarist - future Tyger of Pan Tang Fred Purser - whose sonic battles with the band's punk faction makes singer Pauline Murray's doom-laden warnings sound even more urgent and compelling.

Pentangle

Basket of Light (1970)

Pentangle's hybrid of folk-rock and jazz improv could tend to the long-winded - an inevitable side effect of cramming so many virtuosos into one band - but it coalesces beautifully here. The simultaneously sinister and sweet Light Flight is a three-minute encapsulation of acid-folk, and their reworking of girl-group classic Sally Go Round the Roses is evidence of bountiful imaginations.

Pere Ubu

The Modern Dance (1978)

Detroit had the Stooges and MC5, but just across the water in Cleveland, Ohio, there was a whole other freak scene going on. After the Dead Boys' and Rocket from the Tombs' lurching

forays into weird, noisy proto-punk, things coalesced artistically with Pere Ubu. Their "avant garage" was radical, theatrical and visceral - here's one of the first great art-rock records.

Lee "Scratch" Perry

Arkology (1997)

"I am the dub shepherd," Perry was fond of quipping. Here, 53 of his productions are corralled into a fabulous three-disc package. Channelled largely through his work with the Heptones, Max Romeo and the Upsetters, this is the sound of sonic boundaries being subjected to a seismic imbalance, all thanks to Jamaican music's brother from another planet.

Pet Shop Boys

PopArt: The Hits (2003)

The Pet Shop Boys' ability to cut to the intellectual and emotional heart of their narratives, while also turning them into impeccably crafted pop songs, was uncanny. They saved their best, most important work for their singles - and here, in all their splendour, are their glory days. Marvel.

Oscar Peterson

Night Train (1963)

The prodigious Oscar Peterson was for years the most technically commanding straightahead jazz pianist since Art Tatum, his work bursting with cascading intros and fills, boogieing left-hand drive, impossible tempos. Classics such as C Jam Blues and Bags' Groove get the full treatment here, with the great Ray Brown on bass.

Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers

Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers (1976)

Petty's emergence at the height of punk had him tagged as new wave, but really his band's debut album was classic American rock revisited, like a lighter, poppier version of Born to Run-era Springsteen. American Girl, as borrowed by the Strokes for Last Nite, was the standout: an amped-up, latterday Byrds.

Astor Piazzolla

Tango Zero Hour (1986)

It's impossible to summarise up the career and influence of the great Argentine nuevo tango composer and bandoneon-player. However, this Kip Hanrahan-produced studio album (for Sting's Pangaea label) caught Piazzolla and his New Tango Quintet at the height of their powers.

Courtney Pine

Devotion (2005)

The mission of the best-known UK jazz saxophonist is audience-building for an eclectic, multicultural and uniquely British jazz. Devotion is his best-realised recorded attempt, embracing reggae, Asian music, blues, soul, and some scalding Coltranesque blowing, with guests including sophisticated singer Jacqui Dankworth.

Pink Floyd

The Dark Side of the Moon (1973)

It speaks well of Dark Side of the Moon's power that mere mention of its name evokes an era, and a lifestyle - contemplative, stoned, corduroyed - in which it was first enjoyed. In reality, this revolutionised Pink Floyd:streamlining their sonic experiments, and focusing lyricist Roger Waters for the journey into further, epic alienations.

Pixies

Surfer Rosa (1988)

The Boston four-piece's first proper album is a head-cleaning blast of noise, energy and gothic drama. Its songs were brusque, acerbic and deeply unusual, but it relies for its dizzying rush on

that most traditional of formal devices: melody. The current CD release also includes the similarly effective preceding mini-LP, *Come on Pilgrim*.

Plaid

Rest Proof Clockwork (1999)

The third album from Plaid was another winner for the Warp label. Less harsh than Aphex Twin or Squarepusher and less cerebral than Autechre, it was electronica at its most inventive and intelligent, with elements of lounge, neo-classical, ambient, techno, proto-clicks'n'cuts and tone poems in the eclectic mix.

The Pogues

If I Should Fall From Grace With God (1987)

The sparkling record that completed the Pogues' conversion from refreshed hoodlum folk-punks to the music world's poet laureates. There's plenty packed in - heartbreaking tales of migration, protest songs, boozy hoedowns, even brass-heavy instrumentals. And, of course, the finest Christmas song that will ever be penned.

Polar Bear

Held on the Tips of Fingers (2005)

Young UK group Polar Bear's melancholy long-note sounds over eerily ticking grooves, bleepy electronics, improv, punky thrashes and subtle two-sax harmony (between the raw Pete Wareham and the mellow Mark Lockheart) is an instantly recognisable signature. This, their second album, is a creative successor to the distinctive Dim Lit.

The Police

Ghost in the Machine (1981)

Their most consistent album, made in the face of rising intra-band tensions, and put to tape in Montserrat. Famed for the joyous musical pile-up *Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic*, though its merits are much better displayed by *Invisible Sun*, the woozy single about the IRA hunger strikers that was banned by the BBC.

The Pop Group

Y (1979)

Barely into their 20s and already hugely ambitious, this bunch of post-punk Bristolians handed production duties to reggae producer Dennis Bovell for their debut. The result was a an unprecedented - and very serious - amalgam of Beefheartian rock, dub and funk, while Mark Stewart's lyrics mixed politics with arthouse poetry.

Iggy Pop

The Idiot (1977)

An act of rock'n'roll resurrection that anticipated the sound of the post-punk future, Iggy Pop's first post-Stooges album brought the best out of the singer and his collaborating musical patron David Bowie. Iggy's lyrical self-awareness lends warmth, even humour to Bowie's bleak synthetic arrangements, notably on *Funtime* and *China Girl*.

Portishead

Dummy (1994)

Dummy would become a byword for a certain type of middle-class dinner party, which does this strange, sad album an immense disservice. Its out-of-time samples, slowed hip-hop beats and melancholy vocals were much mimicked, but it's easy to forget just how deeply odd and unsettling it sounded at the time.

Prefab Sprout

Steve McQueen (1985)

Titled *Two Wheels Good in the States*, the second album by the County Durham band confirmed mainman Paddy McAloon as one of the most literate and melodically gifted songwriters of his generation. Meanwhile, Thomas Dolby's production created the perfect lush context for these meditations on romantic longing and sexual desire.

Elvis Presley

From Elvis in Memphis (1969)

As he had once transmuted R&B, so Elvis, making his late-1960s comeback, embraced heady Memphis soul with a passion that left each song he seized breathless. Backed by a mass of violins and gospel singers, his voice became correspondingly richer, soaring out of his Hollywood quagmire and leaving boyhood behind.

The Pretenders

Pretenders (1980)

Appearing as the fractious punk 70s became the jaunty new-wave 80s, the Pretenders' first album masterfully harnessed both melody and attitude. One of the great debuts of its decade, it owed its success to Chrissie Hynde's tough/vulnerable frontwoman presence. Composer of all but two tracks, she proved the viability of mixing sentimentality and smarts.

The Pretty Things

SF Sorrow (1968)

The story of tragic Sebastian F Sorrow is often thought of as the first rock concept album; it was a huge influence on the Who's *Tommy*. However, it also defines the psychedelic experience - you can hear its brilliant, delicately frazzled songs and acid-soaked guitar solos in bands from Super Furry Animals to the Coral.

Primal Scream

Screamadelica (1991)

In which the previously Stones-obsessed rockers hooked up with acid house production hero Andy Weatherall to take us on a dreamy, neo-psychedelic trip through pulsing, groove-laden uppers and spacey, blissed-out downers. The soundtrack to a million jazz cigarettes, it's one of the few Mercury prize winners nobody disagreed with.

Prince Buster

Fabulous Greatest Hits (1967)

Fabulous Greatest Hits comes in a baffling number of varieties - it has been endlessly rereleased with different track listings - but then, diversity was Prince Buster's trademark. Whatever version you get, it skips from ska to rocksteady, lewd "rude" reggae to social commentary, blistering instrumentals to tender vocal ballads, never once losing its footing.

Prince & the Revolution

Parade (1986)

Squeezed out between a psychedelic curio (*Around the World in a Day*) and a career-defining double album (*Sign o' the Times*), *Parade* shows Prince in all his contrary glory. From the quirky cabaret of *Under the Cherry Moon* to the sweeping, epic pop of *Mountains*, it's got the lot, including the daringly minimal *Kiss* - perhaps his greatest song.

Priscilla Paris

Priscilla Sings Priscilla (1967)

The lead singer with the Paris Sisters, Priscilla had been taught by Phil Spector to sing in a baby-doll manner that sounded at once intensely sexual and something like a return to the womb. This collection took his blueprint for her and ran with it, with *He Noticed Me* and *Stone Is Very Very Cold* hypnotic, sensuous, and mildly disturbing.

The Prodigy

Music For the Jilted Generation (1994)

The Prodigy's retaliation to the anti-rave Criminal Justice Act is a searing, relentless, magnificent work. Beats rattle along at warp speed, cavernous basslines threaten to swallow the listener whole, and the pace never lets up. The album is a defiant, unapologetic affirmation of rave culture, and it had a single, simple message for the authorities: "Fuck them, and their law."

Propaganda

A Secret Wish (1985)

The "Abba from hell" (as ZTT label propagandist Paul Morley styled them) emerged with Dr Mabuse, a debut single as startling as Relax by labelmates Frankie. Producers Trevor Horn and Steve Lipson gave their Germanic industrial sound an orchestral pop sheen, notably on Duel (and its evil twin Jewel) and P-Machinery.

The Psychedelic Furs

Talk Talk Talk (1981)

Trashy glamour and punk attitude collide in the Furs' second album, which offers the raw, pre-movie version of Pretty in Pink and the bewildered break-up regrets of All of This and Nothing. Seedy sax chases relentless guitar riffs, and Richard Butler's rasping vocals bring angst and sarcasm to the poetry.

Public Enemy

It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back (1988)

Rock and pop offer the listener few sensations as thrilling and liberating as the moment when the appeal of an artist or genre suddenly becomes clear, when music that previously seemed unfathomable and alien starts to make perfect sense. It's hard to escape the suspicion that Public Enemy's second album holds such a pre-eminent position - enshrined in innumerable rock magazine polls as the best hip-hop album ever, the solitary rap album permitted into Rolling Stone magazine's 100 Greatest Albums of All Time - because it marked the moment when rock fans belatedly realised that hip-hop was a vital musical force. Here was an album possessed of such power, so ferociously intelligent, so brimming with anger, wit, vitality, revolutionary intent and all the other things that rock music in 1988 lacked. After hearing It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back, only an idiot could continue to dismiss rap as novelty or noise. Its position as the official greatest hip-hop album of all time has a downside. It is the only hip-hop album to suffer the same fate as Pet Sounds, or Revolver, or OK Computer: to have been analysed to within an inch of its life. Most people even a passing interest in rock history know pretty much everything there is to know about it. They know that its righteous message of black empowerment took a knock a couple of years after its release, when Public Enemy's Minister of Information, Professor Griff, told one interviewer that Jews were "responsible for the majority of wickedness that goes on across the globe". They know that the Bomb Squad's remarkable, dense production style required sampling on a scale previously unseen: Night of the Living Baseheads alone contains 18 different samples, ranging from the obligatory (James Brown) to the unlikely (punk-funkers ESG and David Bowie's Fame) to the self-referential (Public Enemy's Bring the Noise). They know that the excitable voice on Countdown to Armageddon belongs to "Dangerous" Dave Pearce, later to join Radio 1 as the most baleful presence on British radio since the Allies caught up with Lord Haw-Haw. On release, It Takes a Nation of Millions ... made hip-hop sound like the future, which it was - just not the way Public Enemy thought it would be. Perhaps the fact that hardly anything followed in its wake, that the Bomb Squad's style was swiftly to be superseded by the smoother, more palatable sound of G-funk, and that the kind of politics it offered would be quietly dropped from hip-hop's agenda accounts for the way the album has survived the endless analysis to still sound fresh and viscerally exciting today. Music offers few more primally thrilling moments than Chuck D's valedictory cry of "Yes!" at the outset of Rebel Without a Pause. Twenty years on and hundreds of words later, hearing it still feels like being woken up with a swift punch in the face.

Alexis Petridis

Public Image Ltd**Metal Box** (1979)

Metallic in name, sound and packaging (it originally came as three vinyl EPs in an aluminium film can), PiL's second album was the sound of John Lydon wriggling free from the sonic straitjacket of punk, courtesy of Jah Wobble and Keith Levene's spiky, scratchy explorations of dub, disco and world rhythms.

Pulp Fiction**OST** (1994)

Has anyone made films with better soundtracks than Tarantino? Pulp Fiction sounded like the mix tape you wish your friend would make you. It breathed new life into Dick Dale and Dusty Springfield, made brief stars out of Urge Overkill, and reminded the world that Chuck Berry was a great comic songwriter. Not just a soundtrack, a great compilation album.

Pulp**Different Class** (1995)

Britpop's greatest album still plays like a peerless indiepop manifesto. Blazing with calls to action for geeky kids everywhere, devilishly sexy provocations and heartbreakingly human ballads, it showed us sex, drugs and rock'n'roll without the gloss, while making them glimmer with real-life, grimy glamour.

Artists beginning with Q

Wednesday November 21, 2007

Guardian Unlimited**Queen****Greatest Hits** (1981)

Purists will recommend 1974's incendiary Sheer Heart Attack, but this first singles package - which takes us from Seven Seas of Rhye to Flash - is the place to start. You'll find lots of anthemic stadium bombast but also well-crafted studio pop, plenty of whimsy and some surprisingly muscular proto-metal.

Queens of the Stone Age**Rated R** (2000)

It begins with singer Josh Homme greedily reciting a roll-call of recreational drugs, and the full-on narcotic hedonism never flags. Combining seismic post-grunge riffs, nihilistic wit and a pathological sense of mischief, Rated R remains the metal album adored by people who hate metal.

Artists beginning with R

Wednesday November 21, 2007

Guardian Unlimited**Sun Ra****Jazz in Silhouette** (1958)

Cult Chicago keyboard player and self-proclaimed intergalactic traveller Sun Ra played a strange blend of big-band swing, warped blues, free jazz and pioneering electronics. His family-like

collective Arkestra perform the beautifully layered original Saturn here, and a storming Blues at Midnight. The music still sounds new-minted today.

Radio Tarifa

Rumba Argelina (1993)

For more than a decade, Radio Tarifa were the quintessential world music band, mixing Moorish and African sounds and rhythms with catchy tunes. Singer Benjamin Escoriza adds a gritty charisma to the cleverly crafted studio concoctions of Vincent Molino and Fain S Duenas.

Radiohead

The Bends (1995)

OK Computer was bigger and Kid A bolder, but The Bends remains many people's favourite Radiohead album. Like The Joshua Tree and Nevermind before it, it redefined arena-rock - anthems of alienation and loss executed with savage grace and sometimes eye-watering beauty. Then, they moved on, because they could.

AR Rahman

Bombay OST (1995)

He is considered by many to be India's greatest living composer, and any number of Rahman's soundtracks could have made this list. Bombay wins out thanks to the emotionally charged orchestral title track (often heard on chillout compilations) and Kehna Hi Kya, which outweirds Björk's Medulla when it comes to vocal arrangements.

Ramones

Ramones (1976)

Never has a package been more thrilling. On the cover, a monochrome photo of four young men in black leather bomber jackets and ripped jeans, with one word filling the top: Ramones. Inside, 14 songs lasting a total of 28 minutes; 60s pop songs pared to the bone, played on buzzsaw guitars, with unrestrained glee in their knuckle-headed simplicity: "Second verse/ Same as the first."

Red Hot Chili Peppers

Blood Sugar Sex Magik (1991)

The album that most vividly documents the Chilis' narcotic highs and lows took their much-copied funk, punk and hip-hop stews to a worldwide audience. Landmark status was assured when Under the Bridge, the album's tear-jerking anthem about the loneliness of scoring heroin, provided an unlikely hit for All Saints.

Otis Redding

Otis Blue (1966)

Who else could pay tribute to Sam Cooke by singing his signature songs? Redding also wrote Respect and I've Been Loving You Too Long, recorded a version of Satisfaction that Keith Richards prefers to the original and made BB King and Smokey Robinson compositions his own. He died two years later, even younger than his idol.

Lou Reed

Berlin (1973)

If Transformer had made Reed pop, Berlin represented something darker - this was a real walk on the wild side. The tale of an abusive relationship between Jim and Caroline, Berlin was epic orchestral gloom, accompanied by the sound of crying children. Record executives cried too - but time has proved them wrong.

Refused

The Shape of Punk to Come (1998)

Despite the portentous title, even Refused couldn't have predicted that this album, heavily indebted to both Nation of Ulysses and the San Diego punk sound of Rocket From the Crypt, would come to be seen as the Year Zero of hardcore punk. Out went DIY ethics, politics and dilettantism; in came silly haircuts and MySpace.

Django Reinhardt

Peche à la Mouche (1992)

The first great European jazz musician, Belgian Gypsy guitarist Reinhardt pioneered a dazzling style of flying runs, humming vibrato and surging chord rhythms, and wrote beautiful ballads, such as the much-played Nuages. This collection from 1947 and 1953 includes his most compatible partner - elegant violinist Stephane Grappelli - and American trumpeter Rex Stewart.

REM

Fables of the Reconstruction (1985)

Fables ... is the neglected gem in the REM canon. It was recorded, unhappily, in London, and perhaps because of that seems to be more steeped in the Deep South than their other albums - listen to the track Wendell Gee for evidence. It drips with unease and dislocation, and nostalgia for a probably imaginary home.

The Replacements

Let It Be (1984)

Though they sprang from the midwestern hardcore punk scene, the Replacements were a classic rock band at heart. Let It Be mingled the two strands, with Paul Westerberg revealing a talent for timeless songwriting - Sixteen Blue and Unsatisfied are among pop's most perfect summations of teen melancholy.

Alasdair Roberts

Farewell Sorrow (2004)

The most traditionally minded artist to emerge from the movement lamentably dubbed nu-folk, Roberts may also be the most lavishly talented, boasting a gloom-laden voice and an uncanny ability to write songs that sound centuries old, yet utterly refreshing. Farewell Sorrow offers an unlikely lyrical diet of poaching, infanticide and chastity.

Smokey Robinson & the Miracles

Going to a Go Go (1965)

The first Miracles LP to give Smokey star billing, and it's not hard to see why. Beyond two of pop's truest love songs (Tracks of My Tears, Ooo Baby Baby) are several more (Fork in the Road, From Head to Toe) that gave rise to the "poet" tag. And the thudding title track is still guaranteed to blow up a dancefloor.

Rocket From the Tombs

The Day the Earth Met the Rocket From the Tombs (2002)

Before Pere Ubu came Rocket From the Tombs, who were busy trying to invent punk in mid-70s Ohio, apparently unaware people were trying to do the same in New York. They never recorded properly, but these no-fi home tapes and local radio sessions demonstrate their power and imagination.

Rodrigo y Gabriela

Live: Manchester and Dublin (2004)

One of the least expected, totally deserved success stories of recent years, this duo from Mexico City started out in a heavy metal band, then moved to Ireland where they developed their extraordinary, often rapid-fire guitar style while busking. On this virtuoso live set they mix anything from flamenco to Dave Brubeck and Metallica.

Virginia Rodrigues

Nos (2000)

Rodrigues is from Salvador, the musical centre of black Brazilian music, where she has developed her own unique afro-Brazilian style. Her voice has the controlled power, clarity and purity of a great gospel singer or opera diva, and on this cool, gently exquisite set she is backed by local percussionists and strings.

The Rolling Stones

Singles Collection: The London Years (1989)

There's no shortage of Stones compilations, but this one feels truest, tracing in minute detail (every A and B side) the journey from youthful blues fans covering Chuck Berry's Come On to the sybaritic rock monsters of Brown Sugar. Everything you need is here.

Sonny Rollins

Saxophone Colossus (1957)

Tenor saxophone giant Rollins' mature style was formed by the mid-50s - like a more rough-hewn, sardonic and fragmented Charlie Parker approach. This wilful, improvisationally awesome set (featuring drum star Max Roach) debuts the classic calypso St Thomas, and includes the slow-burning extemporisation Blue Seven.

Max Romeo & the Upsetters

War Ina Babylon (1976)

Belying his reputation as the voice of lewd novelty records, Max Romeo brings exalted levels of poignancy to apocalyptic material inspired by the early-70s Jamaican political crisis. Meanwhile, producer Lee "Scratch" Perry and his band wrap the singer in an earthy roots embrace. One of the all-time great reggae albums.

Wallace Roney and Geri Allen

Jazz (2006)

Trumpeter Roney is the man a dying Miles Davis picked to help him out on his last concerts. But Roney is an heir, not a clone - this blisteringly creative session, reflecting In a Silent Way and Bitches Brew, shows how inventively the legacy can still go.

Mick Ronson

Slaughter on 10th Avenue (1974)

As guitar-playing second banana to the stars (Bowie, Ian Hunter), Ronson was doing well to even get a shot at a solo record. But what a record it is ... Melodramatic, romantic, steeped in theatre (the title track was a cover of the theme from a 1957 gangland film), Slaughter ... was a cross between disposable novelty and glam-rock genius.

Roots Manuva

Run Come Save Me (2001)

As well as hosting Witness (1 Hope), possibly the most outstanding British hip-hop song yet recorded, Run Come Save Me offered a series of dub and bashment-influenced raps that provided an insight into the weed-addled paranoia and detachment of a generation of urban youth.

The Roots

Things Fall Apart (1999)

The fact that the Philadelphia rap group used live instruments and turned their shows into euphoric hip-hop history lessons overshadowed their records until Things Fall Apart. A masterwork, rich in sonic texture and bold in execution, it tackled a succession of vital, difficult issues with insight, sensitivity and finesse.

Diana Ross

Diana (1980)

The most successful album of Ross's career, Diana was the fourth project from the Chic Organisation in 1980. It was also one of their best. Originally written for Aretha Franklin, it features Upside Down and I'm Coming Out and lesser-known examples of Chic's glacial disco, Tenderness and Now That You're Gone.

Roxy Music

For Your Pleasure (1973)

From the outset, Brian Ferry envisaged Roxy Music as a musical pop-art project. Their first, eponymous album - a brash, stylistic pile-up - fit Ferry's vision, introducing them as musical postmodernists well before the concept became commonplace. Roxy flirted equally with trashy rock'n'roll and highbrow experimentation. The outrageous image and glam-rock hit singles turned on the teenies, but the sense of a keen intelligence at work excited serious rock fans just as much. The second Roxy album, For Your Pleasure, oozes confidence right from the opening faux dance-craze stomper, Do the Strand, in which Ferry wittily sings the praises of his own song, while throwing in arch references to the can-can dancer La Goulue and the ballet legend Nijinsky. At this point, Roxy Music were still a red-blooded rock band, and you can hear them sparking off each other throughout the record. Nevertheless, it's in the oddness rather than the rock that you can hear Roxy Music altering the nature of British pop music: In Every Dream Home a Heartache paints a picture of decadence and ennui in which the protagonist serenades an inflatable sex doll. Ferry's aesthetic was key to Roxy's reputation, as he used the songs to build up the lounge-lizard persona that would lead to him being mocked by the music press as Byron Ferrari. This album signalled the end of Roxy the glam-art project. Not long after, Brian Eno left the group. Though he was a non-musician, his electronic contribution to the early Roxy sound was crucial, if usually subtly deployed (one exception is the loopy synth solo on Editions of You). Mike Barnes

Röyksopp

Melody AM (2001)

Apparently the original title of this striking debut was For Kids and Elderly People, and you can hear why: cornerstone hit Eple is likely to beguile any age. Melody AM is evocative of a starry, chilly night, festooned with bittersweet moments and, on Poor Leno, the rather lovely voice of Erland Øye.

Run DMC

Raising Hell (1986)

Some records define their times, others give rise to genres; Run DMC's third album is today regarded as the starting point of a new era. Walk This Way, the inspired collaboration with Aerosmith, turned Run, DMC and Jam Master Jay into global pop stars, and this blast of shouty raps and pugilistic beats ushered in hip-hop's golden age.

Todd Rundgren

Something/Anything? (1972)

Rundgren not only produced and arranged this double LP, he wrote it all and played every instrument on three of the four sides. I Saw the Light opened the "pop" side, followed by the "experimental", "hard rock" and "musical" sides. The third solo album from the Philly whizkid is a masterclass in eclecticism.

Kate Rusby

10 (2002)

On which the Barnsley balladeer revisits (and, in places, rerecords) favourite tunes from her career's first decade. The perfect point of entry for anyone as yet untouched by her crystalline vocals, 10 might be populated by jolly colliers and brave knights but it talks with a voice from the here and now.

Rush

2112 (1976)

Of course it's preposterous. What album featuring a 20-minute sci-fi "suite" somehow inspired by Ayn Rand couldn't be. But who could hate Rush? You can't make this sort of thing without knowing you'll be mocked for it. And there's real grandeur amid the pomposity. Think of it as a rock stately home.

George Russell

New York Big Band (1978)

Russell emerged in the mid-50s as one of jazz's great compositional innovators. He co-wrote the iconic Latin-bop theme *Cubana Be, Cubana Bop* (with Dizzy Gillespie), which gets a thundering remake here. A powerful band explore the atmospheric *Listen to the Silence*, and a revelatory *God Bless the Child*.

The Ruts

The Crack (1979)

West Londoners as adept at reggae as at punk thrash, the Ruts recorded just one album but laid deep roots, subsequently influencing US hardcore bands Black Flag and Minor Threat. *The Crack* demonstrates why: through the heartfelt holler of Malcolm Owen, the Ruts delivered singalong youth anthems, oozing character and conviction.

Artists beginning with S

Wednesday November 21, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

The Sabres of Paradise

Haunted Dancehall (1994)

Five years later, Andrew Weatherall would be calling himself "Lord Sabre" and attempting to control the weather. In 1994, however, the producer used his imagination to more productive effect - creating techno's first concept album. Simultaneously hi-tech yet fogged by pot and dub reggae, this remains an imaginary soundtrack to a more dangerous London.

Saint Etienne

Foxbase Alpha (1991)

Only two new arrivals from the suburbs (genuine Londoner Sarah Cracknell joined midway through) could conceive such a rhapsodic valentine to the capital. Steeped in pop history, at once nostalgic and proudly modern (witness the dub-house rewrite of Neil Young's *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*), it's a debut radiant with possibility.

Oumou Sangare

Moussolou (1991)

One of the finest female singers in Mali, Oumou Sangare is a national celebrity both for her songs and for the messages behind them. On this early recording, she was backed by a small band dominated by guitar, kamelngoni and a mournful violin that matches her fine, thoughtful songs of advice to women.

Saturday Night Fever

OST (1977)

The best soundtrack of all time? If judged by the ratio of brilliant tunes to filler (95%/5%), quite possibly. The soundtrack that defines its era - the disco-dancing late 70s - better than almost any

other? Without doubt. The one whose songs, especially the Bee Gees' contributions, still sound fantastic? Absolutely. That's why it sold 25m copies.

Boz Scaggs

Silk Degrees (1976)

Scaggs was a member of Steve Miller's San Francisco psychedelic band before leaving to pursue a career as a blue-eyed soul boy. On his seventh solo album, he hit commercial paydirt with a set of mellifluous R&B, including Lowdown and Lido Shuffle, making him an unlikely star of the late 70s.

Ulrich Schnauss

A Strangely Isolated Place (2003)

Berlin-based Schnauss almost sparked a shoegazing revival with his second album. He used to record as Ethereal 77, which sums him up: his widescreen music is lush and atmospheric; each track boasts a bunch of intertwining melodies. It's a consistently uplifting wall of sound.

Maria Schneider

The Concert in the Garden (2004)

The question "will the big bands come back?" was redundant by the time composer-bandleader (and former Gil Evans assistant) Schneider burst on the scene with genre-defining albums of powerful, intelligent, contemporary orchestrations. This elegant, enriching album shows her at the height of her powers.

Chico Science & Nação Zumbi

Afrociberdelia (1996)

A year before his shockingly premature death, Chico Science was the auteur of this booming redefinition of the Brazilian sound. AfroCiberdelia's heavy rock riffage, married to a neat embrace of electronics and a fondness for traditional drums, frogmarched the country's music out of the wine bar once and for all.

Scissor Sisters

Scissor Sisters (2004)

That Scissor Sisters' debut album went on to become the bestselling album of 2004 fails to convey quite how strange a proposition they were. Lyrics attacking Rudi Giuliani's clampdown on the NY gay scene? Silly hats? A disco cover of Pink Floyd's Comfortably Numb? Clearly the freaks had inherited the earth.

John Scofield

Time on My Hands (1989)

Guitarist Scofield injected a Hendrix-inspired raw power into the sometimes discreet sound of bop guitar, and this is one of his best sessions - not just for his own bluesy muscularity, but for the strength of some Mingus-inflected compositions. A huge bonus is saxophonist Joe Lovano; here the two begin a dialogue that continues today.

Scorch Trio

Luggumt (2004)

Norwegian bass player Ingebrigt Håker Flaten, drummer Paal Nilssen-Love and Finnish/American guitarist Raoul Björkenheim are the ultimate improvising power trio. Ferocious, yet subtle and supremely gifted, they would never dream of just playing a backbeat; instead they deliver maximum rock kicks and peak on the title track as a sort of superspeed blur.

Raymond Scott

Manhattan Research Inc (2000)

Bandleader Scott was such a perfectionist that he preferred machines to musicians, building a

vast studio, crammed with valves, relays and early sequencers, to make jingles and experimental soundscapes. His obsessive secrecy meant he was virtually written out of electro-history until this handsome book and double CD appeared.

Scritti Politti

Songs to Remember (1982)

The missing link between Scritti's initial incarnation as a squat-dwelling anarcho-punk collective and their later embrace of shiny synth-pop, this sees Green Gartside's candy-coloured voice brilliantly negotiating a confection of lovers' rock, white funk, beatnik jazz and folk pop. The stand-out track remains The Sweetest Girl.

The Searchers

Sounds Like Searchers (1964)

The most gentlemanly of the Merseybeat acts, on their fourth album the Searchers quit trying to rock so hard and settled for a darker folk-pop (drummer Chris Curtis's melancholic If I Could Find Someone, Burt Bacharach's overlooked Magic Potion) that bruised easily.

Sean Paul

Dutty Rock (2002)

Over the summers of 2003 and 2004, Sean Paul was inescapable. Smooth of flow and suave of manner, he embraced his status as dancehall's chosen crossover star fully. Few albums are as conducive to throwing moves on the dancefloor as Dutty Rock, a non-stop sequence of addictive, irresistible anthems.

Section 25

From the Hip (1984)

Although the former Blackpool guitar band's pulsating Looking From a Hilltop became an unlikely hit in New York clubs, their Bernard Sumner-produced electronica experiment was initially ignored. However, sampled by Orbital and the Shamen, From the Hip's trance states and 303 drum machines now sound like an accidental prototype for techno.

Sex Pistols

Spunk (1977)

Recorded before they switched record companies and changed line-up for Never Mind the Bollocks, this "official bootleg", produced by Dave Goodman, is rawer and unarguably superior than its successor. With Rotten's lyrics upfront in the mix, it sounds as if they are bringing about the downfall of western civilisation.

SF Jazz Collective

SF Jazz Collective (2005)

Under Joshua Redman's leadership, the SFJC pioneered a new approach to jazz repertoire that complements their better-funded counterparts in the "straight" world. This is the first of a series of beautifully recorded live concerts that uses Ornette Coleman's compositions as a springboard to new work.

The Shadows

20 Golden Greats (1987)

Hank Marvin took his specs from Buddy Holly and his guitar sound from America's west coast surf style - yet the Shadows are as British as Butlins. Just one listen to Apache or Foot Tapper reveals how exciting their instrumental pop must have sounded in 1960, and how priceless they remain.

The Shangri-Las

Myrmidons of Melodrama (1994)

Most 60s girl groups were primly romantic, but the Shangri-Las crackled with bad attitude. Hoodlums were lusted after, parents angrily defied and mangled corpses pulled from car wrecks, while producer Shadow Morton took Phil Spector's teen-pop blueprint to ever more vulgar proportions - a man gleefully defacing the Wall of Sound with a spray can.

Ravi Shankar

In Celebration (1995)

Co-produced by his friend George Harrison, who described Shankar as the godfather of world music, this well-illustrated four-CD set aimed to show the diversity of his work. There are classical sitar pieces, examples of his orchestral collaborations, playing alongside the LSO - and of course more experimental pieces, some involving Harrison himself.

Del Shannon

Runaway With Del Shannon (1961)

Here the baby-faced Michigan boy races his hiccupping Buddy Holly falsetto through 12 tracks of splendidly shiny-shoed rock'n'roll. The title track, with its famous wah-wah-wahs and musitron middle-eight, still burns brightest. But tales of latest flames, proms and heartbreak, accompanied by spry, nippy guitars, make the blood surge faster, too.

Sheila & B Devotion

King of the World (1980)

Disco never got more fabulous than this. Bringing together a famous French singer with Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers of Chic, this album of glamorous melodies and silvery beats married European gloss and American sparkle. The result was deliciously catchy cosmic pop, schmaltzy enough to melt the heart and sharp enough to move the feet.

Andy Sheppard

Dancing Man and Woman (1999)

British saxophonist Andy Sheppard emerged in the late 80s, and has become one of the most quirkily subtle, inventive and sought-after UK musicians. This lyrical set reflects his fondness for massaging understated song-like pieces, with an augmented band including legendary American electric bassist Steve Swallow and tabla player Kuljit Bhamra.

Wayne Shorter

Alegria (2003)

Wayne Shorter's magnificent quartet is one you should hear before you die - but they are best experienced live. Alegria, however, is a great studio jazz product, expertly produced by Robert Sadin. It demonstrates Shorter's gifts as a composer-improviser, bringing classical and folkloric elements into a richly nuanced whole where every track is quite different.

Sigur Rós

Ágætis Byrjun (1999)

The Icelandic post-rockers' second album brought their breathtaking music to an international audience. The lyrics were all but irrelevant, but nobody could mistake its originality, its crystalline splendour or its sheer emotional wallop. Sadness never sounded so beautiful.

Judee Sill

Abracadabra: The Asylum Years (2006)

If you only buy one exquisitely beautiful album by a heroin-addicted prostitute and armed robber, it should probably be this. 70s singer-songwriter Judee Sill's brief life story is shocking. More shocking still is that it yielded music of such grace and fragility, tinged with country and soul, untainted by the abjection that enveloped her.

Silver Jews**American Water** (1998)

In the roll-call of great American poet-songwriters who deliver acute insight in memorable parcels of dazzling imagery and engaging humour, David Berman's high standing is assured. His third album, recorded with Pavement's Stephen Malkmus, is lyrically and musically his most confident, its country-rock tunes gentle yet fiery and deliciously hummable.

Paul Simon**Graceland** (1986)

Did he break the cultural boycott of apartheid-era South Africa? Did he exploit African artists for his own gain? In the end, did it matter? Graceland sees the songwriter on top form: finding fresh inspiration, collaborating with an array of talented performers and introducing South Africa's amazing music to the rest of the world.

Simple Minds**Sons and Fascination** (1981)

Before they descended into epic pomp-rock bluster, Simple Minds were purveyors of supremely romantic, slyly futuristic synth-pop. Sons and Fascination found them cannily mining a seam of mesmerising, shimmering art-rock, while tracks like Love Song were so gorgeously lustrous that you could even forgive them their future.

Frank Sinatra**September of My Years** (1965)

A grave Sinatra approached 50 with the last of his unimpeachably great albums. The swing was set aside, and Sinatra given sweet string settings for his ruminations on ageing and mortality. When Sinatra managed humility - too rarely, once he left Capitol Records - his artistry was undeniable.

Siouxsie and the Banshees**Juju** (1981)

Perennial masters of brooding suspense, the Banshees honed their trademark aloof art-rock to its hardest and darkest pitch on Juju. With their musical alchemy at its peak and Siouxsie at her most imperious, pop marvels such as Spellbound and Arabian Knights were poised, peerless exercises in magic realism that you could dance to.

Sister Sledge**We Are Family** (1979)

Chic's Midas touch turned the first of their album productions for Sister Sledge into a virtual Greatest Hits - He's the Greatest Dancer, Lost in Music, We Are Family and Thinking of You are symphonic disco perennials while Easier to Love and Somebody Loves Me proved that the Chic production team were no slouches when it came to ballads.

Sisters of Mercy**Floodland** (1987)

Goth made most sense when taken to extremes, and Sisters of Mercy were its most devout absolutists. Gravel-voiced vocalist Andrew Eldritch scaled new heights of heroic pretension, while the introduction of Meat Loaf producer Jim Steinman on the none-more-black This Corrosion was a marriage made in heaven.

Sizzla**Black Woman & Child** (1997)

The most charismatic - as well as controversial - Jamaican singer to emerge since the dancehall era, Sizzla's Black Woman & Child represents the young Rasta's most satisfying assimilation of

reggae's present with the past. Digital production meets conscious lyrical themes, harking back to the 70s roots heyday.

Slade

Slayed? (1972)

Slademan swept the nation in '72, and Noddy Holder's awesome roar shot arguably their best studio album to No 1. With boomer-booted choruses as big as football stadiums, hits such as Gudbuy T'Jane remained fresh enough for Oasis to adopt the formula more than 20 years later, while the melancholy Look at Last Nite is the Black Country's own Don't Look Back in Anger.

Slave

The Best Of (1994)

Contemporaries of The Commodores and Kool & the Gang, Dayton, Ohio's Slave were an enormous funk-pop band, 11 members strong, who produced an enormous funk-pop sound, particularly on hits, featured here, such as Slide, Just a Touch of Love and Watching You, sung by funk legend Steve Arrington.

Slayer

Reign in Blood (1986)

It's easy to forget how controversial this record was: a satanic metal band that signed to a hip-hop label (Def Jam), took the visceral blur of hardcore punk as their starting point, and opened the album with a song "documenting" the atrocities of Josef Mengele. Nothing since has rocked the boat quite like it. Not even Slayer themselves.

Sleep

Jerusalem (1999)

A neat lesson in how to create a cult following in one easy step. Take your new album to your label and watch their horror as they realise it's one single, sludgy, 70-minute stoner rock song called Dopesmoker. They refuse to release it, a bootleg is leaked, and your status as underground legends is secured.

Slick Rick

Behind Bars (1994)

Recorded while Slick Rick was in prison for attempted murder, Behind Bars chillingly applies his trademark sly, sing-song delivery to tales of prison brutality, while his jokey retelling of sexual misdemeanours is undercut by the album's stunning highlight All Alone (No One to Be With), a melancholy, empathetic meditation on single motherhood.

Slint

Spiderland (1991)

Furtive and insidious, Spiderland sidles out of the speakers to strangle listeners in a filigree web of aching, beautiful melodies, to engulf you in spine-chilling darkness. Opening on a rollercoaster and closing with a gut-wrenching, desolate scream, Slint redefined rock dynamics with a fervour that has proved inspirational and unsurpassable.

The Slits

Cut (1979)

The Slits' debut made manifest punk's claims of revolution. Neither technically adept nor - as the topless, mud-caked Amazonians on the cover made abundantly clear - guitar-playing men, the Slits here created a stylistic fusion from chaos. Bob Marley had spoken of the punky reggae party. This, in fact, was it.

Slowdive

Souvlaki (1993)

Though regarded on release as a shoegazing anachronism in the dance-obsessed UK, more patient listeners abroad discovered the Thames Valley quartet building on their washy ethereal roots, and exploding out of their skins on the epic *When the Sun Hits* and *Souvlaki Space Station*.

Sly and the Family Stone

***There's a Riot Goin' On* (1971)**

Holed up in his LA mansion, surrounded by guns, dogs and drugs and racked with hallucinatory paranoia, Sylvester Stewart's dark epic marked the end of the euphoric optimism of the 1960s. Bleak and full of foreboding, this was a desperate postcard from the centre of a life falling out of control.

The Small Faces

***The Autumn Stone* (1969)**

In truth, you don't need a lot of Small Faces - like many classic 60s bands, they were inconsistent - but everything you do need is on their first posthumous best-of. Subsequent editions have also corrected the original's one significant error: excluding the monumental *All or Nothing*.

Harry Smith (ed)

***Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952)**

Music history is crammed with colourful figures, but you'd be hard pushed to find anyone as kaleidoscopic as Harry Smith - abstract artist, experimental film-maker, occultist, bohemian and compulsive collector. As well as paper aeroplanes and Ukrainian Easter eggs, Smith collected records from the 1920s and 30s in their thousands: blues, bluegrass, barn-dance floor-fillers, gospel, murder ballads, Cajun tunes, songs about current affairs - a comprehensive catalogue of American music's formative sounds. In 1952, when Smith winkled out 84 songs for this anthology, "folk music" was a genre under construction. In Smith's imagining, it meant any music released commercially in the years before the Depression, to be enjoyed by ordinary people. The resulting six albums represented a snub to segregated, cold-war-mongering America. Black singers nestled alongside white, coal miners beside lawyers, virtuoso musicians beside those who could barely play. Smith's liner notes give deadpan synopses of the lyrics: "Zoologic miscegeny achieved in mouse-frog nuptials. Relatives approve." Raw and urgent, these songs and their performers reach across time to communicate the essence of what it is to be human. Smith saw in them an alternative history of his country, written by people who lived the Depression every day of their lives, who never chinked a cocktail glass, but danced in the dust and sang to the stars. His anthology is boisterous, cacophonous, plain bonkers at times - and captures everything that is life-affirming about music. Maddy Costa

Patti Smith

***Horses* (1975)**

Horses - a frenzy of garage rock, jazz and beat poetry - was the first album from the New York punk scene, and a blueprint for generations of musicians. Michael Stipe of REM once claimed that this record "tore my limbs off and put them back on in a whole different order".

The Smiths

***Hatful of Hollow* (1984)**

The rough energy and raw emotion at the heart of the Smiths is captured perfectly in this collection of BBC sessions, singles and B-sides. Versions of *Handsome Devil* and *What Difference Does It Make?* burn with tough love, and the tender finale of *Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want* is a masterclass in moving simplicity.

Smog

***Knock Knock* (1999)**

The seventh album from Bill Callahan, aka Smog, was his first collaboration with US alt.rock auteur Jim O'Rourke. It also saw him flirt with mainstream success, as three tracks from his latest

collection of lugubrious modern folk got used in film soundtracks, notably the handclap-enhanced, sardonically upbeat Cold Blooded Old Times, which can be heard in High Fidelity.

Soft Cell

Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret (1981)

What made Soft Cell's first album work so well, and set it apart from other albums of its synthtastic era, wasn't just its intimations of seediness and illicit doings but the sense that Marc Almond was singing from experience. His prematurely jaded bleat, coupled with David Ball's detached electronic backing, were a clarion call to deviants everywhere.

Soft Machine

Vols 1 & 2 (1968/69)

Although the production on these albums has been criticised - not least by the group - both are still a wonderful mix of "pataphysical" pop songs, jazz and psychedelia, and they're available on one CD. Powered by Robert Wyatt's hyperactive drumming and Mike Ratledge's fuzz organ, Soft Machine burst with invention and youthful energy.

Son of Bazerk

Bazerk, Bazerk, Bazerk (1990)

In the middle of the run that produced Public Enemy's Fear of a Black Planet and Ice Cube's solo debut, the Bomb Squad production team fashioned this neglected masterpiece. Son of Bazerk hitches his sharp-suited testifying to some abrasive hip-hop beats to create the missing link between Public Enemy and James Brown.

Sonic Youth

Daydream Nation (1988)

Though experimental, Daydream Nation confirmed Sonic Youth as a group who were primarily in love with rock'n'roll. Filled with a reimagining of the possibilities of electric guitar, this was psychedelic music in a not awfully psychedelic time - the Electric Ladyland, in fact, of the then-unnamed Generation X.

Soundgarden

Superunknown (1994)

Soundgarden were the over-achievers of grunge, and their fourth album remains a benchmark in rock production. Everything about it is huge, the powerful drum sound matching the ambitious, Beatles-influenced melodies. The album spawned equally massive hits, including Black Hole Sun, Spoonman and Fell on Black Days, each showcasing Chris Cornell's distinctive, ebbing roar.

Spacemen 3

The Perfect Prescription (1987)

Sonic Boom and Jason "Spaceman" Pierce's mantra was "minimal is maximal" and Spacemen 3's magnum opus took the listener on a long, strange narcotic trip, from the chemical euphoria of Ecstasy Symphony to the opiate daze of Come Down Easy. Drone-rock is rarely so assured, alluring and addictive.

Spandau Ballet

Journeys to Glory (1981)

Spandau were kilt-wearing soulboys high on funk and synthpop at the cutting edge of London's club culture. Their debut album of "music for heroes" (as mythmaker Robert Elms wrote on the sleeve) featured Tony Hadley's android foghorn, first single To Cut a Long Story Short and further Kraftwerk-meets-Gap Band hits Muscle Bound and The Freeze.

Sparks

Kimono My House (1974)

The unforgettable California-born Mael brothers - pretty-boy falsetto Russell and Hitler-lookalike keyboardist Ron - were justly revered for their contribution to 1974. A fantastic pop album that offered witty, punning lyrics and the feeling that they were too clever by half - which was why their moment was over by 1976.

Bubba Sparxxx

Deliverance (2003)

A chubby white guy from the sticks is an unlikely hip-hop hero, but Bubba Sparxxx's "hick-hop" opus is one of the best hip-hop albums of this decade. Blending Timbaland's digital production with bluegrass samples, country laments and Bubba's own poetic, flowing musings on the South, Deliverance was an enthralling reminder of hip-hop's ability to function as folk music.

Britney Spears

Baby One More Time (1999)

Take one pretty teenager with an average vocal croak and bundles of ambition. Put her in a schoolgirl outfit, have her proclaim her virginity and then give her some solid gold songs to sing. Et voila! You have this 20m-selling debut album, which changed the face of pop.

The Specials

Singles (1991)

To glimpse the musical ambition of Jerry Dammers, look at the progress he made in just two years: from the ska of Gangsters, through the ersatz lounge of International Jet Set to arguably the greatest British No 1, 1981's terrifying, glowering Ghost Town. Then there was the late bloom of the Special AKA in 1984, which yielded the student-union anthem Nelson Mandela, and the delightfully sardonic (What I Like Most About You Is Your) Girlfriend.

Phil Spector

Back to Mono (1991)

Phil Spector remains the only person in pop to have written a Christmas album that is festive, fun and musically unimpeachable. But such miracles are possible when you orchestrate throwaway teen-pop with operatic intent. There's nothing ephemeral about this four-CD overview of his 1960s heyday - even its obscurities are giddy with invention.

Spice Girls

Spice (1996)

In 1996, Britpop appeared finally to be on its way out - thanks to five young women armed with little more than chutzpah who slammed the door behind it and hammered the final nail in its coffin with their celebratory, unapologetic pop. Spice is gleefully riotous; only the most stony-hearted could resist joining in.

The Spinners

Pick of the Litter (1975)

Detroit's Spinners, active since 1954, became producer/arranger Thom Bell's next proteges after the Stylistics, and he gave them a warmer, more measured and mature sound. Pick of the Litter, their third album, doesn't feature as many hits as their 1973 debut; nonetheless, it's the more seamless collection, including The Games People Play, a mid-70s soft-soul classic.

Spirit

Future Games (1977)

Although many consider Spirit's quartet of late-60s psychedelic jazz-rock albums their best, others prefer their run of four albums in the mid-70s, which peaked with this sci-fi/cosmic pop tour de force about war, faith and love. From Randy California's fevered imagination came this sonic mosaic, its 14 tracks interspersed with Star Trek dialogue and random FX bursts.

Spiritualized

Ladies and Gentlemen We Are Floating in Space (1997)

Jason Pierce denied it was his "I've just been dumped" album, and rightly so - this album is as much about addiction as it is about breaking up. Spiritualized's existential masterpiece combined hypnotic, cyclical guitar riffs, white-noise freak-outs, chemical oblivion and cosmic musings on flawed mortality to devastating effect.

Dusty Springfield

From Dusty With Love (1970)

After triumphing with the Memphis set, Dusty headed north for the nascent Philadelphia sound. Gamble & Huff were a couple of years shy of their string-driven soft-soul peak, but songs such as Let Me Get in Your Way and Never Love Again are ornate, exquisite and just-so for the singer's most delicate performances.

Artists beginning with S (part 2)

Thursday November 22, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Bruce Springsteen

Born to Run (1975)

Springsteen's third album propelled him into the mainstream with its tales of front porches, engines and suburban escape, alongside a clamour of sound: piano, saxophone and guitar. Springsteen once said he wanted his music to sound like Roy Orbison singing Bob Dylan, produced by Spector.

Squarepusher

Feed Me Weird Things (1996)

When drum'n'bass became mainstream in the 90s, with groups such as Everything But the Girl picking up on its beats, 21-year-old Tom Jenkinson (aka Squarepusher) took it as far out as possible. His jazz-rock bass jostled with convoluted breakbeats to dazzling effect. To use the parlance of the time, it's completely mental.

Tomasz Stanko Quartet

Suspended Night (2004)

A near-perfect jazz album, in which Polish trumpet maestro Stanko, abetted by a dazzling young trio, says something new and beautiful with the styles and syntax of an earlier time. Each detail sounds fresh and joyous, while Stanko's inspired and emotional themes and solos fly high above.

Candi Staton

Candi Staton (2003)

Before becoming a disco queen, Candi Staton set the standard for southern soul, and this long-overdue collection reveals why. I'm Just a Prisoner is a lesson in tormented passion, while Staton's rough-hued voice and attitude turn Tammy Wynette's Stand By Your Man from a passive whimper into a wounded cry.

Status Quo

Twelve Gold Bars (1980)

Forget if you were born into an era where such things mattered that Quo were the epitome of uncool, and just listen to the songs. A heart that does not beat a little faster during the introduction to Down Down or the chorus of Caroline is one out of time with rock'n'roll's pulse.

Steel Pulse

Handsworth Revolution (1978)

Steel Pulse were the punk rockers' British reggae act of choice, and Handsworth Revolution was the soundtrack to punky-reggae parties and Rock Against Racism rallies. With its conscious lyrics and militant rhythms, the Birmingham band's debut captured the era's dread mood only it did so with dub power rather than power chords.

Steeleye Span

Please to See the King (1971)

It's easy to dismiss Steeleye Span because of their singalong hits, but this early album was a subtle folk-rock classic. The line-up featured Ashley Hutchings on bass and Peter Knight on fiddle. Martin Carthy played rousing electric guitar, while helping Maddy Prior and Tim Hart provide the harmony singing.

Steely Dan

Pretzel Logic (1974)

Their reputation as snide, professorial jazz-pop aesthetes is such that one hesitates to declare that any Steely Dan record possesses soul. But if the heart beating through Pretzel Logic's lugubrious harmonies and warm grooves is a con, it's so beautifully rendered as makes no difference.

Gwen Stefani

Love. Angel. Music. Baby. (2004)

It was as though the idea of the frontwoman of a dodgy ska-punk band deciding to become a full-fledged pop star was so weird that all involved simply threw every idea at it: dumb cheerleader chants over thunderous booms; musings on fame over europop synths; a couple of gorgeous New Order-esque ballads. This was the establishment of a fabulous new pop star.

Stereo MCs

Connected (1992)

Sounding like a rap Happy Mondays, this third Stereo MC's record was crammed with hulking, dancefloor-friendly electro/hip-hop. As strikingly fresh as it was thrillingly funky, the album made such an impact that the duo were unlikely winners of both the best British album and best British group awards at the 1994 Brits.

Stereolab

Emperor Tomato Ketchup (1996)

Let's be honest: how many albums of space-age, Marxist, easy-listening future-pop does anyone need? The anglo-French band's aesthetic reached its apogee on album number five, where they thickened the brew with elements of jazz, hip-hop and techno, helped out by post-rock nabob John McEntire. One compilation title encapsulates Stereolab's charms: Serene Velocity.

Rachel Stevens

Come And Get It (2005)

Come and Get It failed to establish Rachel Stevens, previously known as the fit one in S Club 7, as a viable solo star, but it's a smart, nuanced pop album, nodding to the past while looking to the future. Stevens herself is integral to the project but sadly, the blank loveliness so essential to her songs' appeal did not endear her to the British public. It was their loss.

Sufjan Stevens

Seven Swans (2004)

Stevens found notoriety for his 50 States project, but this intimate, less billowing album is a jewel. Many of its 12 songs draw their inspiration from the Bible from the title track's reference to the

book of Revelation, to the delicately worked account of Christ's atonement in *To Be Alone With You*.

Rod Stewart

Every Picture Tells a Story (1971)

This was the album that transformed Stewart from a cult star to an international icon, and rightly so. *Maggie May* was the big single but every track on this effervescent record burned with wit, passion and Stewart's trademark laddish joie de vivre. And side two is as perfect a 20 minutes as rock has to offer.

Stiff Little Fingers

Inflammable Material (1978)

Much of punk was pose, but Belfast-formed SLF's incendiary debut was fuelled by the genuine anger and confusion Irish youths felt during the Troubles. It's full of powerful imagery of the period, from suspect devices to love affairs conducted over barbed wire. Tracks such as *Alternative Ulster* still blow many of their mainland equivalents away.

Stone Roses

Stone Roses (1989)

From *I Wanna Be Adored*'s statement of intent to *I Am the Resurrection*'s wig-out finale, the Stone Roses' debut offers 49 of the finest minutes of British rock. With their loose-limbed grooves, surefire 60s pop melodies and coolest-gang-in-town swagger, the Roses became the heroes of a generation.

The Stooges

The Stooges (1969)

So messed up With their debut album in just three words the Stooges turned teenage frustration into an art form. Raw and groundbreaking, what began as an exercise in capturing the group's live show ended up spawning *I Wanna Be Your Dog*. Forty years on, it remains the dirtbag's national anthem.

The Stranglers

The Raven (1979)

Tired of pretending to be punks, the Stranglers sought fresh inspiration and found it in hard drugs. The Raven's intricate instrumental passages are dominated by chilly synthesizer textures, while the band's trademark sardonic humour is counterpointed by vocal tenderness and uninhibited intellect. Pretty melodies, songs of geopolitical and narcotic paranoia it all adds up to an eccentric masterpiece.

The Streets

Original Pirate Material (2002)

UK garage was renowned for many things, but the brilliance of its MCs was not among them. Hence the shock of hearing Mike Skinner for the first time, with his unique Brum-accented style, his surfeit of dry wit and his startlingly keen eye for the foibles of British youth culture.

The Strokes

Is This It (2001)

Probably the most important rock album of the past 10 years: it prised the zeitgeist away from nu-metal, restored the pre-eminence of rattling neo-new-wave, and was the chief catalysing influence on Arctic Monkeys. Moreover, it sounds great, evoking the boho New York milieu which these days is hanging on in Manhattan by its fingertips.

The Stylistics

The Best Of (1975)

The commercial apogee of symphonic soul in the UK. Thom Bell, the black Bacharach, refined the techniques he had used with the Delfonics to create hit after flugelhorn-enhanced hit, from Betcha By Golly Wow to You Make Me Feel Brand New, sung with the exquisite anguish of a castrato by Russell Thompkins Jr.

Subway Sect

We Oppose All Rock'n'Roll 1976-80 (1996)

For some, punk was a new set of rules to rigidly adhere to; for others, it was the sound of a door opening. Subway Sect were in the latter category, artily dedicated to getting rid of rock. This fascinating compilation charts their brave, doomed attempts, from Velvet Underground-ish noise barrage to orchestrated crooning.

Suede

Dog Man Star (1994)

Guitarist Bernard Butler was on his way out, vocalist Brett Anderson was floating into the chemical stratosphere, and Blur and Oasis were about to eclipse them. Still, Dog Man Star was an admirable attempt to soundtrack 90s England using reverb-caked Sturm und Drang rather than nudge-nudge irony. Borderline ludicrous, but in a very good way.

Sugababes

Overloaded (2006)

The inexorable progress of Sugababes is best represented through singles, and Overloaded brings them together. From the quirky, sullen pop of Overload, through the mash-up early adoption of Freak Like Me, to the glitzy pop of Push the Button, it's all here, delivered without a hint of a smile.

Suicide

Suicide (1977)

Like the Velvet Underground before them, the influence of Suicide far outstrips their record sales. Informed largely by 50s rock'n'roll (but ditching the guitars for a synth and a drum machine), their debut went on to inspire entire genres (electro, industrial, goth) while providing a template for every shade-wearing, fuzzy rock'n'roller since.

Donna Summer

Endless Summer (1994)

This compilation contains mainly the single versions, not the full-length 12-inch cuts, of the revolutionary electronic disco Summer recorded with Giorgio Moroder. It also includes some of her post-Moroder material. But it's hard to fault a collection featuring such awesome proto-electro as I Feel Love and Chic-rivalling disco rhapsody Heaven Knows.

Sunn O)))

Black One (2005)

Drone, doom, dark ambient call it what you want, but Sunn O))) are its masters, and this is arguably the most fully realised of their six albums. Sunn O))) enlisted black-metal luminaries Wreath and Malefic to add an infernal edge to the album, going as far as locking the latter in a coffin while recording his vocal tracks. Dark, indeed.

Super Furry Animals

Fuzzy Logic (1994)

A debut full of poppy, crazy exuberance, Fuzzy Logic was a spark of colourful light in the plodding early days of Britpop. It was bursting with bright, west-coast-influenced melodies; wonky guitars, druggy lyrics and woozy ballads about gathering moss and hometowns tempered the liveliness gorgeously.

Supergrass**I Should Coco** (1995)

Supergrass's debut staked out a substantial acreage of Britpop territory for the Oxford trio, who were so young that they wished, on *Caught By the Fuzz*, that their older brother was there to rescue them from a druggy misadventure. Packed with tunes and boy-next-door mischief, *I Should Coco* was one of the little gems of its day.

John Surman**Rarum Vol 13: Selected Recordings** (2004)

Surman is the British Jan Garbarek, known for his imaginative fusing of post-Coltrane sax jazz and English classical, folk and choral music. This fine compilation features his lyrical sax-and-synths solo music, but also some forceful contributions to ECM sessions by bassist Miroslav Vitous, pianist Paul Bley and guitarist John Abercrombie.

Esbjorn Svensson Trio**Plays Monk** (1996)

Svensson's trademark sound with his trio EST is a blend of melodic, somewhat Pat Metheny-like themes, classical music, rock vamps and fluent jazz soloing in often unjazzy contexts. This inspired early set ingeniously rekindles familiar Thelonious Monk tunes by imposing unexpected grooves, sparing use of strings and EST's tight empathy.

Bettye Swann**Bettye Swann** (2004)

Bettye Swann was so self-effacing that, when she became disillusioned by music-industry machinations in the 1970s, she simply faded from view. That modesty is much in evidence on this compilation of plaintive soul. Swann's soft, compassionate voice nestles among boldly coloured, horn-driven arrangements, subdued yet compellingly beautiful.

The Sweet**Greatest Hits** (2001)

These glam contemporaries of TRex and Slade were always best as a singles band. This storming collection gathers 20 of their 1970s hits and rare misses. Titles such as *Teenage Rampage* and *Hellraiser* say it all: big-chorused hair-metal that inspires bands to don make-up and scream the house down to this day.

Swell Maps**A Trip to Marineville** (1979)

The prototype lo-fi band, Birmingham's Swell Maps combined furious punk noise-outs such as *HS Art* with ambient instrumentals and other experimental interludes such as *Gunboats*. This album, a No 1 in the new independent chart, marked out the band, including brothers Epic Soundtracks and Nikki Sudden, as trail-blazing post-punkers: technically limited but endlessly inventive.

System of a Down**Toxicity** (2001)

On the morning of September 11 2001, America's No 1 album was a berserk rampage through whiplash heavy metal, Balkan folk, tremulous melodrama, savagely surreal humour and barbed lyrics about police violence and the Armenian massacre. The sound of angry young men trying every idea at once before it's too late.

Artists beginning with T

Thursday November 22, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

T Rex

Electric Warrior (1971)

A glam-rock classic, *Electric Warrior* cemented Marc Bolan's metamorphosis from acoustic hippy into sequin-faced, electric-guitar, strutting rock god. His lyrical blend of fantasy, poetry, humour and sexual energy inspired Morrissey, while Johnny Marr and Noel Gallagher have both clearly studied Bolan's riffs.

June Tabor

At the Wood's Heart (2005)

June Tabor is one of the great English singers, capable of taking songs from almost anywhere and making them her own. This thoughtful, sad-edged set shows her skill as a musical storyteller on a selection that ranges from traditional ballads to songs by Geoffrey Chaucer, Anna McGarrigle and Duke Ellington.

Craig Taborn

Light Made Lighter (2001)

Young keyboard visionary Craig Taborn is a regular partner of the adventurous New Yorker Tim Berne. He can play like a lighter Cecil Taylor, be delicately rhapsodic like Brad Mehldau, or melodically lumpy and lateral like Monk. On this remarkable debut, he works within the jazz tradition yet ventures to its edges at times.

Rachid Taha

Tékitoi (2004)

Rachid Taha has always argued that Algerian styles and rock are closely linked. This is the most convincing evidence he has produced: a furious, declamatory set that is firmly rooted in his north African styles and rhythms but has the sparse vitality of a punk classic. The standout track - a tribute to his hero, Joe Strummer - starts with a wailing burst of desert flute and hand-drums before introducing the familiar guitar riff of what is now titled *Rock el Casbah*, with Arabic influences carefully mixed in with the Clash classic. Elsewhere, Taha's blend of anger and angst has been distilled into a set of songs that match crunching guitar chords, simple riffs and angry lyrics (in French and Arabic) with subtle, wailing flourishes of north African embellishment. This is the most powerful, direct fusion of rock and north African styles to date. A scruffy, wild and compelling performer, Taha started out listening to chaabi street music in Algeria, and was influenced by English punk after moving to France. There he started his first band, *Carte de Séjour*. He developed his current style with his long-term producer, Steve Hillage, who is responsible for the guitar work and programmed percussion here, and co-wrote several of the tracks (including one in collaboration with Brian Eno). On an earlier album, *Diwân*, Hillage had helped Taha to rework and update a series of favourite songs from across north Africa by mixing oud and strings with contemporary beats and guitar work. One of those songs, the rousing *Ya Rayah*, became an international hit for Taha, and is included as a bonus track here. Robin Denselow

Talk Talk

The Colour of Spring (1986)

Mark Hollis turned his back on synth-pop stardom for the haunting, unclassifiable beauty of *Spirit of Eden* and *Laughing Stock*. This is where you can hear him turning. Even as *Chameleon Day* points toward the avant-garde hush to come, *Life's What You Make It* is an irresistible farewell to the charts.

Talking Heads

Fear of Music (1979)

Edgy, intense and claustrophobic, *Fear of Music* is the record where Talking Heads started making sense, filling out their earlier, somewhat bony art-rock with fleshier funk. Nowhere is it more successful than when twitchy house-rocker *Life During Wartime* hits full tilt.

Tangerine Dream

Phaedra (1974)

This marked the point at which the Krautrock phenomenon went mainstream. Tangerine Dream had travelled from avant-garde beginnings to chart success with *Phaedra*. With its electronic soundscape of sequencers and synths, *Phaedra* is one of the most seductive ambient albums, and a precursor to techno and its offshoots.

Tango Crash

Otra Sanata (2005)

This Berlin-based band, led by Argentinians Martin Iannaccone (cello) and Daniel Almada (keys), generates a dark, disturbing mix that incorporates soulful bandoneon, broken beats and spoken word. Eclectic, elegant and erotic, it's a multi-faceted album that propels nu tango into the electronic present.

Taraf de Haidouks

Band of Gypsies (2001)

International success for these gifted Romanians took their government by surprise. This generous and energetic live album boosts the collective's family core with guests including Kocani Orchestra and Bulgarian clarinetist Filip Simeonov, resulting in exultant tracks such as *Bride in a Red Dress* and the breakneck *Carolina*.

Art Tatum

Tatum Group Masterpieces Vol 8 (1956)

Even Vladimir Horowitz was a Tatum fan: the Ohio musician was the fastest and most elaborate pianist jazz had known, with a harmonic awareness that allowed him to revoice themes and switch keys on the fly. This fine collaboration contrasts his headlong energy with the lazy lyricism of saxophonist Ben Webster.

Cecil Taylor

Jazz Advance (1956)

Pianist Taylor is sometimes called the Art Tatum of the avant-garde: with Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, he spearheaded 60s free jazz. Taylor's roots in Monk and Ellington are more explicitly balanced with his modern-classical awareness in this astonishing breakthrough recording, with the idiosyncratic saxophonist Steve Lacy on two tracks.

Teardrop Explodes

Kilimanjaro (1980)

They tend to get categorised as neo-psychedelic, but in truth it's impossible to pin down Julian Cope's group. *Kilimanjaro* offers guitar pop, synth pop and psychedelia among its many styles. It also gives up clues as to why Cope took the long, strange journey of the past 25 years or so.

Teenage Fanclub

Grand Prix (1995)

Grand Prix was the most satisfying refinement of that curious musical strand: Scottish indie kids playing their take on the Byrds and Neil Young. Sad, then, that it was released in the summer of English musical nationalism, when its many glories were obscured by the heat-haze of Britpop.

Television

Marquee Moon (1977)

A gorgeous, ringing beacon of post-punk, even if it did come out six months before Never Mind the Bollocks. Television weren't really on message, punk-wise: there are heavy doses of prog and pop here, and lots of long guitar solos. Nevertheless, every second is packed with melody and incident, scaling amazing new heights of sophistication and intensity.

The Temptations

All Directions (1972)

The meeting between psychedelic soul and the Motown hit factory may have begun with Cloud Nine and Psychedelic Shack, but All Directions showcases these five superb singers and auteur producer Norman Whitfield at the height of their powers witness Run Charlie Run, and their spacey epic Papa Was a Rollin' Stone.

Jake Thackray

Jake in a Box (2006)

In his heyday, Jake Thackray's wry British take on French chanson was a fixture on That's Life! Reissued last year, his complete works seem less antique light entertainment, more weirdly prescient. With his stunningly acute observational eye, brilliant turn of phrase and mordant wit, he sounds like Alex Turner's granddad.

The The

Soul Mining (1983)

The artful pop of 21-year-old Matt Johnson's second album hides an underlying menace at odds with the chart-toppers of the time. Uncertain Smile is its classic, though Johnson's ambition is best realised in the dazzling Giant, which unfurls over 10 minutes to a percussive conclusion.

Thin Lizzy

Live and Dangerous (1978)

Of course, there were those who carped about the accuracy of the Live part of the title. But it's precisely the beefing-up of the sound in the studio afterwards that gives Live and Dangerous its verisimilitude: this is what great rock bands actually feel like when you're there.

The 13th Floor Elevators

The Psychedelic Sounds of (1966)

One version of the birth of psychedelia credits it to a Texas garage-rock band's key musician being a man blowing into a jug. Maybe not, but the Elevators' electric howl still sounds like nothing else, and You're Gonna Miss Me still thrills.

This Heat

This Heat (1979)

Formed in 1975, This Heat were one of the most enigmatic groups of the decade. Avid experimenters in sound in a way that evoked the Krautrock groups of the early 70s, they took a long time making their debut album but when it came it was eclectic, moving from the brutal, lurching instrumental Horizontal Hold to the early mixology of 24-Track Loop.

This Mortal Coil

It'll End in Tears (1984)

A shape-shifting indie supergroup helmed by 4AD founder Ivo Watts-Russell, This Mortal Coil wrote pleasingly dreamy songs, but it was always the cover versions that defined them. Liz Fraser's ghostly rendering of Tim Buckley's Song to the Siren and Howard Devoto's desolate delivery of Big Star's Holocaust are the jewels in their debut's crown.

Carroll Thompson**Hopelessly in Love** (1981)

The debut album by the Queen of Lovers' Rock captures this maligned genre at its height, when scores of London singers, mainly female, allied soul vocals to tough reggae rhythms and forlorn melodies. Mostly self-penned, and featuring genre classic I'm So Sorry, this is a sort of dub-wise version of Joni Mitchell's Blue.

Richard & Linda Thompson**I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight** (1974)

Their performing relationship seemed to exemplify the credo that marriage is for better and for worse; this is the former. The debut by the first couple of folk rock began a partnership of superlative guitar-playing and classic, enduring song as stormy as it was moving and contemplative.

Throbbing Gristle**DOA: The Third and Final Report of Throbbing Gristle** (1978)

Theorists par excellence, the inventors of industrial music teemed with subversive, original ideas, most of which were more fascinating to hear about than to actually hear. But their second album is gripping: a collage of churning noise, answerphone death threats, perky Abba tributes and, in Hamburger Lady, perhaps the most terrifying four minutes of music ever recorded.

Justin Timberlake**Justified** (2002)

Who'd have pegged Justin Timberlake one of five nonentities in the 'NSync pop franchise as a quality R&B singer? The Neptunes-produced Justified was one of the great surprises of the year, presenting Timberlake as an assured artist who was as comfortable with hip-hop as pop the quintessential modern crossover act, you could say.

Tinariwen**Aman Iman** (2007)

Everyone's favourite blues-rocking Touareg ex-guerrilla fighters, replete with souvenir bullet wounds. Wiry, hypnotic, dense and otherworldly, this is music that skirts all notions of a comfort zone and completes a circle connecting Hendrix, Bo Diddley, Ali Farka Tours, Lightnin' Hopkins and Husker D. Astonishing.

Keith Tippett**Mujician I & II** (1998)

British piano virtuoso Keith Tippett's career has spanned vast crossover orchestras, free jazz and jazz-rock groups, as well as unaccompanied performances like these captivating 80s object lessons in cutting-edge solo piano improv. John Cage prepared-piano effects and hints of Cecil Taylor are audible, but Tippett's masterly independence dominates.

TLC**CrazySexyCool** (1994)

Singer-rapper Lisa Left-Eye Lopes had to be granted permission to leave rehab to record the album (she had burned down her boyfriend's house while drunk), so it's a miracle that TLC managed to make CrazySexyCool at all, let alone make it such a triumph. Destiny's Child took all they know about slinky, empowered, modern R&B from here.

Christine Tobin**You Draw the Line** (2002)

The Dublin-born singer they call the Bjsrk of jazz vocals. Forthright, self-revelatory, eclectic and experimental, she sings Dylan and Leonard Cohen material alongside her own repertoire here sometimes with a confiding folksiness, sometimes with a hymnal stateliness.

Toots & the Maytals

Pressure Drop: The Definitive Collection (2005)

No corner-cutting exercise this. This is a gift: 49 cuts from the band's decade-long association with the Trojan label, including all the big hits (the title track, Monkey Man, Funky Kingston) and some earlier, less familiar selections. This is the man who put reggae and rocksteady on speaking terms with the punch of Stax-era classic soul.

Peter Tosh

Legalize It (1978)

One of the three founders of the Wailers, Tosh was more hardline than either Bob Marley or Bunny Wailer, although his first and best solo album combines militancy with insight, humour and spirituality. The anguished love song Why Must I Cry shows that reggae songwriting can match anything in pop.

Colin Towns/Mask Orchestra

Another Think Coming (2001)

The most confident and melodically memorable big-band recording from Towns, a film and TV composer full of wild brass lines, abruptly slamming chords, hot solos and odd resolutions. Folksy themes turn via Stravinskyesque slews into Mission: Impossible climaxes, and the Beatles' I Am the Walrus is quirkily recast.

Stan Tracey

Under Milk Wood (1965)

British pianist Stan Tracey's Under Milk Wood boppish themes inspired by the Dylan Thomas radio play is a legend of UK recorded jazz. The themes are among Tracey's best, and his partnership with saxophonist Bobby Wellins is a union of the hammer-wielding jazz sculptor and the decorator of fine porcelain.

Traffic

Traffic (1968)

Formed around a youthful Steve Winwood, drummer-lyricist Jim Capaldi and sublime songwriter Dave Mason, Traffic moved from psychedelic hits Paper Sun and Hole in My Shoe to pioneer progressive rock, using Chris Wood's wind instruments. Here, Mason's folk-rock counters Winwood's jams a key influence on Paul Weller's 90s sound.

Rokia Traor

Bowmboi (2003)

The most bravely experimental female performer in Africa, Rokia Traor started out matching her cool, clear vocals against her own acoustic guitar and traditional instruments such as the ngoni. Here she is joined by the strings of the Kronos Quartet. Her recent work with opera director Peter Sellars suggests there will be more surprises soon.

A Tribe Called Quest

Midnight Marauders (1993)

A curious concept album, with the songs linked by a computer voice, Tribe's third LP was perhaps their least distinctive, yet it represented the epitome of a refreshingly complicated style. Oh My God, Award Tour and Steve Biko are the sort of hip-hop classics that hardcore fans and casual dabblers could embrace equally enthusiastically.

Tricky

Maxinquaye (1995)

The bastard child of the Bristolian trip-hop trinity that found success in the mid-90s, Tricky revelled in his black sheep status. Unsettling, dark and occasionally beautiful in its twitchy

paranoia, his debut album is a heady brew, leavened by the bewitchingly laconic tones of his then partner, Martina Topley-Bird.

Lennie Tristano

Lennie Tristano (1955)

The ultimate modern-jazz purist, pianist Tristano hated hot licks, theatrical emoting or rhythm sections that did anything but mark time; he advocated a linear improvisational style devoted only to melodic variation. But he was brilliant enough to make it mesmerising, as this great recording with his sax student Lee Konitz demonstrates.

The Troggs

Hit Single Anthology (2003)

Blessed with the barest musical ability and a frontman who sounded like a sexually predatory farmhand, the Troggs excelled at faintly unsettling two-minute proto-punk explorations of the male libido's labyrinthine complexities: Give It to Me; I Know What You Want; I Want You; I Can't Control Myself.

Tubeway Army

Replicas (1979)

The album that inspired teens and grown adults to don white make-up and call themselves Numanoids. Gary Numan's stark, alienated synthesiser took machine rock to the masses. The Likes of Cars, and Are Friends' Electric?, are still being sampled (by Sugababes and others) almost 30 years later.

23 Skidoo

Seven Songs (1981)

Sampled by innumerable dance acts, Skidoo's white-boys-playing-world-music experiments and Burroughs-inspired musical collages blazed trails for how music is made today. Their debut still sounds glorious, full of radical gestures such as cheekily relocating a rightwinger's radio broadcast within a torrent of multicultural avant-funk.

McCoy Tyner

Enlightenment (1973)

Pianist McCoy Tyner became famous through the John Coltrane quartet, but his percussive chording and passionately streaming, trill-packed style took a more amiable turn later. This live set adds funk and Latin elements to Tyner's torrential approach, and includes the soulful, anthemic Walk Spirit, Talk Spirit.

U2

Achtung Baby (1991)

After the bombast of Rattle and Hum, and faced with being left behind as pop's guard underwent a radical change, U2 headed to Berlin and reinvented themselves for a new era. Achtung Baby showed their powers of adaptation to the full, and contains, in One, perhaps their finest song.

Ultramagnetic MCs

Critical Beatdown (1988)

A heady rush of fractured breakbeats, dizzying tempo changes and raps that could almost have been composed from random words out of sci-fi novels. The Bronx rappers' debut showed hip-hop some new horizons, and, in Kool Keith's acerbic raps, introduced one of the genre's most compellingly individual lyricists.

Uncle Tupelo

March 16-20, 1992 (1992)

Jeff Tweedy and Jay Farrar were suburban punks whose decision to play rural music sparked the

birth of a new genre: alt.country. This, their folkier record, was the third of four albums they made before they split and Tweedy became cult rock royalty with Wilco.

Artists beginning with U

Thursday November 22, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

U2

Achtung Baby (1991)

After the bombast of Rattle and Hum, and faced with being left behind as pop's guard underwent a radical change, U2 headed to Berlin and reinvented themselves for a new era. Achtung Baby showed their powers of adaptation to the full, and contains, in One, perhaps their finest song.

Ultramagnetic MCs

Critical Beatdown (1988)

A heady rush of fractured breakbeats, dizzying tempo changes and raps that could almost have been composed from random words out of sci-fi novels. The Bronx rappers' debut showed hip-hop some new horizons, and, in Kool Keith's acerbic raps, introduced one of the genre's most compellingly individual lyricists.

The Undertones

The Undertones (1979)

The Undertones are probably the most fondly remembered group of the punk era. Why? Because of the warmth of John O'Neill's songwriting, the band's evident joy in playing those songs, and their cheerful resistance to being caught trying to be trendy. Only the last of the 16 tracks here is anything less than a delight.

Underworld

Dubnobasswithmyheadman (1993)

Before Born Slippy took them overground, Underworld made this dark dance classic a claustrophobic, black-as-night procession of startling modern techno. Dirty basslines, rolling electronic loops and menacing vocals conjured up visions of paranoia and urban decay, while offering up propulsive rhythms that you just had to dance to.

United States of America

United States of America (1968)

1968 was not short on musical revolutionaries. The United States of America, however, began their revolution from within. Dr Joseph Byrd's USA ditched guitars for a raft of electronic gizmos, with odd vaudevillian touches. Unstable, yes but the band's sole LP is a testament to their psychedelic social commentary.

UNKLE

War Stories (2007)

Former Mo' Wax mogul James Lavelle's switch to guitars was greeted sniffily by dance-music purists. But, viewed from a rock perspective, War Stories is an extraordinary modern electro-goth album, full of the conflicts and anxieties of our times, with corrugated anthems that deserve to be played louder than bombs.

The Upsetters

Super-Ape (1976)

The sound of Lee Scratch Perry at the height of his powers, before mammoth substance use permanently hobbled him. What Super-Ape offers is not so much dub versions of hits, including Max Romeo's War Ina Babylon, as bold, startlingly dark deconstructions: blacker than dread, as the comic-book-style cover would have it.

Artists beginning with V

Thursday November 22, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Various

100% Dynamite (1998)

Boutique label Soul Jazz set out their stall with the first of many Dynamite collections. It documents Jamaican reggae in its infancy, and the strange and wonderful things that happened when Studio One's finest session players started melding ska with soul, funk and jazz.

Various

2manydjs As Heard on Radio Soulwax Volume 2 (2002)

Belgian brothers David and Stephen Dewaele are masters of the techno/rock mash-up, and their efforts have never been bettered. Tune in to Radio Soulwax and hear Felix da Housecat rub up against Iggy Pop and the Peter Gunn theme morph into Basement Jaxx's Where's Your Head At? Instant party.

Various

Acid Drops, Spacedust and Flying Saucers (2003)

The definitive UK psychedelic collection captures British pop taking the safety catch off. The anything-goes atmosphere meant that opportunists, chancers and charlatans all got their three minutes. But while they may be daft, they are never boring, and the high points Tintern Abbey's Vacuum Cleaner, 23rd Turnoff's The Dream of Michelangelo are vertiginous.

Various

Amarcord Nino Rota (1981)

Producer Hal Willner made his mark by putting together this dazzling tribute to Rota's Fellini film scores a mad, bad and beautiful compilation featuring Debbie Harry, David Amram, Sharon Freeman, a then unknown Bill Frisell and the bright young Marsalis brothers.

Various

Artificial Intelligence (1992)

Faceless techno bollocks was the typical put-down for this kind of music in the early 90s. But Sheffield label Warp pushed Artificial Intelligence as electronic listening music, a more cerebral, spacier take on the Detroit techno template. A showcase for the likes of Aphex Twin, Autechre and Speedy J, it still sounds fresh today.

Various

The Best of Sugarhill Records (1998)

The midwives at hip-hop's birth were independent labels, and the biggest of the early days was Sugarhill. Sylvia Robinson's label released the first rap single (Rappers' Delight by the Sugarhill Gang) and dominated recorded rap's formative years. Single-disc collections are bewilderingly numerous, but this one contains most of the highlights.

Various

CD86 (2006)

It has been mocked for years as the epitome of wimpiness and incompetence, but the indiepop movement of the 80s produced an awful lot of good songs. Not so many terrific bands this was a singles-based scene which is why this compilation should fulfil all your twee needs.

Various

Balearic Mastercuts (1996)

As dance genres go, Balearic had remarkably relaxed entry requirements: if it was mellow, uplifting and went well with sunshine and ecstasy, it was in, whatever its provenance. This definitive collection, packaged in Ibiza blues and yellows, files acid-house dreamers such as the Grid and Sheer Taft next to the Blow Monkeys and Chris Rea.

Various

House Mastercuts (1995)

House music moved with such joyous velocity that it took a few years for someone to compile its defining moments. This album presents house as futurist black pop, absorbing disco (Ce Ce Rogers' Someday), gospel (Joe Smooth's transcendent Promised Land) and strange new possibilities (A Guy Called Gerald's Voodoo Ray).

Various

Classic Salsoul Mastercuts Vol 1 (1993)

In 1976, Salsoul released the first ever official 12-inch single, Double Exposure's Ten Percent. But its place in history would have been assured anyway by the way it finessed Philly soul into an immaculate, oft-sampled disco template. Dance music rarely gets more glorious than Loleatta Holloway's Love Sensation or the Salsoul Orchestra's Runaway.

Various

Crucial Electro 2 (1984)

With none-more-80s graphics and Delbert Wilkins title, it looks like a charming period piece, but Streetsounds' mix albums introduced many Britons to hip-hop. The genre would eventually rule the world, but minimal tracks such as Afrika Bambaataa's Planet Rock still carry an alien tang today an echo of how strange they sounded in 1984.

Various

Cuisine Non-Stop (2002)

There was a time when a chanson compilation would have seemed naff. But times change, and when the compiler is David Byrne, the result is a fascinating and dynamic tour de force of world music with a French accent, with entertaining, absorbing tracks by Lo'Jo, Arthur H and the cheeky LaTordue.

Various

Dave Godin's Deep Soul Treasures Volume One (1997)

Englishman Dave Godin turned Mick Jagger on to R&B, founded the Tamla Motown Appreciation Society and spent his entire adult life collecting obscure soul records. This compilation was his proudest achievement: a set of songs chosen for their raw emotional power, the heartbroken flip-side to soul's uplifting beat.

Various

Do the Pop (2002)

If punk was most noticeable in New York and London, its effect was felt further afield. In Australia, for example, Radio Birdman and the Saints inspired arguably the world's most exciting scene of underground, high-energy rock bands. They're all here.

Various

Futurism (2002)

In 2001, techno underwent a facelift, applied some lipstick and electroclash was born. With artists drawing on punk and 80s synth-pop for inspiration, a new generation of charismatic dance stars emerged. Miss Kittin, Peaches, Tiga, Felix da Housecat and the much-maligned Fischerspooner all feature on this collection.

Various

Girl Groups Lost and Found (One Kiss Leads to Another) (2005)

Four CDs of teen angst made to look like mirrored compacts nestling in a hat box, this is a 120-track guide through the soulful sounds and battered hearts of the 60s girl groups. There are death-pop classics, garage, shimmering ballads and out-there gems on this lovingly compiled collection.

Various

Guilty Pleasures (2004)

Not so much an embrace of kitsch as a timely reappraisal of the pre-punk 1970s, in particular the beautifully crafted studio pop of 10cc, ELO, Andrew Gold and Captain & Tennille. The Guilty Pleasures brand may have been subsequently debased (Diane Warren power ballads?), but honestly, what's not to like here?

Various

Headz (1996)

MoWax's anthology of trip-hop, that much-maligned but quietly influential genre which applied dub's spliffed-up methodology to hip-hop. Among the coma-paced delights on this sprawling two-disc amuse-bouche (Vol 2 was a whopping four-CD set) are Nightmares on Wax, Autechre, UNKLE, Howie B, DJ Shadow and Tranquility Bass.

Various

Impressed with Gilles Peterson Vol 1 (2002)

Peterson's collection of 1960s Brit-jazz rarities is, by turns, exotic (the indo-jazz of Joe Harriott and Amancio D'Silva), rambunctious (the blistering bop of Tubby Hayes and Ronnie Ross) and pastoral (Michael Garrick, Rendell/Carr). It shows that Britain could hold its own when compared with the big boys of American jazz.

Various

It'll Never Be Over for Me: 20 Northern Soul Masterpieces (1998)

A stellar compilation of the American dance music that soundtracked pilled-up athletic dance moves in the Wigan Casino through the 70s. A faster, funkier, more delirious take on Motown, tracks such as Chuck Woods' Seven Days Too Long could inspire anyone to backflip.

Various

Jumpin' Vol 1 (1998)

Only a dolt still writes disco off as mere good-times frippery, but few compilations combine the familiar and the strange this persuasively. Machine's There But for the Grace of God Go I offers caustic social comment; Dinosaur L's Go Bang could be a Basement Jaxx record; and Loose Joints' Is It All Over My Face? is eccentric art-disco brilliance.

Various

Let the Good Times Roll: 20 of New Orleans' Finest R&B Classics (2002)

R&B and rock'n'roll from New Orleans had a markedly different flavour: like the city, it seemed more funky, exotic and louche than the rest of the US. There's a gloriously suggestive crackle about everything here, from Shirley & Lee's title track to Lee Dorsey's cheerfully scatological Ya Ya.

Various

London Is the Place for Me (2002)

When the Windrush generation arrived in postwar Britain, they brought their culture along with them. This excellent compilation gives an airing to the music they made about their new home, from Lord Kitchener's *The Underground Train* to Lord Beginner's *Victory Test Match*, a celebration of the first of many West Indian cricketing triumphs at of course Lord's.

Various

New Orleans Funk (2000)

James Brown claims to have invented funk with *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag*, but listening to Smokey Johnson's incredible drumming on Professor Longhair's *Big Chief*, released a year or so earlier, gives pause for thought. Whether or not this superlative collection of Big Easy funk classics rewrites history, it's still a great listen.

Various

Nuggets (1972/1998)

Every copy of the *Nuggets* compilation should come with a warning sticker: approach with caution. Because whether you're 15 or 50, if you've ever wanted to pick up a guitar, flail your arms around a drum-kit and experience for yourself the intoxicating thrill of making music, these songs will silence any qualms and impel you to start a band. Even if you've never played an instrument before. Even if you wouldn't know an A sharp from a B flat - let alone realise that (context aside) they're the same note. Rock critic and guitarist Lenny Kaye absorbed this music - the garage rock that flared across 1960s America in the wake of the British invasion - as a teenager in New Jersey. It made his future career, as champion of the Stooges and the Ramones and collaborator with Patti Smith, not a choice but an imperative. By 1972, when Kaye gathered these songs together for Elektra Records, most of them had been forgotten, abandoned as guitar bands vied to outdo each other in orchestral pomposity. Compared with the prog rock that was in vogue when *Nuggets* came out, Kaye's collection of "original artifacts from the first psychedelic era" delivered a concatenation of short, sharp, electric shocks to the system. *Nuggets* was reissued in a CD facsimile last year, but anyone who hasn't heard it should know that its 27 songs are so addictive, you'll want to hear the other 91 on the four-CD behemoth (including the original album in its entirety) released by Rhino in 1998. *Nuggets revisited and expanded* tells you more or less everything you need to know about 1960s garage. That it was fervid and filthy, graceless and glowering. That lack of musical aptitude wasn't considered an impediment. That it was a restlessly experimental hotchpotch of Bo Diddley rhythms, drug references, fearsome basslines, teenage protest against societal mores, buzzing guitar effects, sleazy leering at girls, and all the berserk noises that could be conjured up from such newfangled instruments as the Farfisa. That *Liar, Liar* by the Castaways is one of the best dance records of the entire 1960s. As is *Wooly Bully* by Sam the Sham. As is *Nobody But Me* by the Human Beinz. As is . . . The one thing *Nuggets* doesn't tell you is that, every so often, girls strapped on guitars, too. Even on the long version, the number of female songwriters and musicians can be counted on the fingers of one hand. These four CDs are drenched in testosterone, their simmering aggression more than once erupting in a Neanderthal howl. It's as if the young men of America weren't so much inspired by the British invasion as goaded into action by these upstarts from across the pond, who not only borrowed heavily from American blues, rock'n'roll and R&B, but had a generation of American girls in a screaming swoon. Hackles raised, they collaborated to create a sound that - thanks to Kaye's intervention - has endured, excited and influenced beyond their wildest dreams. Maddy Costa

Various

OHM: The Early Gurus of Electronic Music 1948-1980 (2000)

OHM is a three-CD history lesson for anyone who wonders what electronica sounded like before laptops. It spans the 20th century, from Clara Rockmore's theremin *Tchaikovsky* to Eno's *Unfamiliar Wind*, via Schaeffer, *Verse*, *Forbidden Planet* and Jon Hassell. Despite some odd omissions, it's a great resource to be dipped into for reference and revelation.

Various

Queer Noises: From the Closet to the Charts (2006)

Journalist Jon Savage's compilation of homosexually themed rock and pop was an unprecedented act of musical archaeology. Who knew there had been a gay record label in the 60s, an outrageous queeny parody of the Beatles called Kay, Why?, or even a track by the Miracles that announced most everybody is AC/DC?

Various

Really Heavy Soul (2000)

Where Sly Stone led, early 70s soul acts followed, embracing rock, psychedelia and righteous politics. The pick of three valuable compilations (try Gimme Shelter and Paint It Black too), Really Heavy Soul, helpfully subtitled Dirty Guitar-Driven Fat-Assed Funk, shows how the likes of Curtis Mayfield, Parliament and Swamp Dogg redrew soul's boundaries.

Various

Run the Road (2005)

A great document of the UK's most exciting underground movement since punk. Many thought this compilation (rounding up Dizzee Rascal, Roll Deep, Tinchy Stryder, Kano and Lady Sovereign among others) would signal grime going overground. Truth is, these tracks still sound too harsh and uncompromising for the mainstream.

Various

Son Cubano NYC: Cuban Roots New York Spices 1972-82 (2004)

This collection of exuberant music by New York artists such as Chocolate, Henry Fiol and Lita Branda fills in a few gaps in the history book: the term world music didn't exist when it was recorded. It's also a Latin dance compilation album with no fillers.

Various

Songs the Bonzo Dog Band Taught Us (2007)

This compilation of prewar novelty jazz is a delight only the terminally po-faced could resist the flatulent delights of Jack Hodges, the self-styled Raspberry King. But it's also historically important: here begins a very English strain of musical humour that percolates through pop, from the Kinks and psychedelia via Parklife to Pete Doherty.

Various

Stax 50th Anniversary Celebration (2007)

A double helping of the greatest southern soul label of all. Booker T and the MGs defined the Memphis sound, backing Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, Eddie Floyd and Carla Thomas in the early 60s. Disc two is the 70s rebirth of Stax, led by Isaac Hayes and the Staple Singers.

Various

Street Corner Serenade (1999)

It's one of pop's great ironies that 1950s and 60s doo-wop was born of poverty, yet, with its abundance of honeyed, harmonising voices and swooning romanticism, it radiates silky opulence. This impeccable compilation gathers its finest songs, and is as deliciously heady as a feast of dark chocolate and expensive red wine.

Various

Sub Pop 200 (1988)

Bruce Pavitt and Jonathan Poneman were petty mythmakers, running the little Sub Pop label until the combination of their marketing skill, Charles Peterson's photography and some hairy men with guitars produced the self-contained phenomenon of grunge. Sub Pop 200 offered the first glimpse of Nirvana, Soundgarden and Mudhoney.

Various

Tamla Motown Gold (1994)

The most famous record label in history, Motown excelled at pocket R&B symphonies. There are 81 of them here over three CDs, focusing on the imprint's 60s golden age, with hits from the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, the Four Tops, the Temptations and more. All of which makes it pretty well the best album ever.

Various

Techno! The New Dance Sound of Detroit (1988)

High-school friends Juan Atkins (Model 500), Derrick May (Rhythim Is Rhythim) and Kevin Saunderson (Inner City) fused Kraftwerk electronics with funky Roland TR-909 drum machines to create a new robotic dance music called techno. The genre's best compilation shows why Detroit's second wave of dance music became as influential as Motown.

Various

Tighten Up Vol 2 (1969)

These days, record-shop shelves groan with reggae reissues, but it was Trojan's budget-priced Tighten Up series that first provided British audiences with a crash course in Jamaican music. Volume 2 is the pick of the original albums; the definitive skinhead reggae collection, its exuberance is still irresistible today.

Various

Tombstone After Dark (1992)

A rousing reminder of why country won a new following in the post-punk era and that not all the best music came from Nashville. There are songs here from California's Dave Alvin and ex-Byrd Gene Clark, but the set is dominated by great Texans. There are Clash hero Joe Ely, Butch Hancock and Jimmy Dale Gilmour, who asks: Did you ever see Dallas from a DC9 at night?

Various

Tommy Boy's Greatest Beats (1999)

Formed in a New York apartment in 1981 by Tom Silverman, Tommy Boy was hip-hop's answer to Factory Records. From Afrika Bambaataa's seminal Planet Rock 12-inch, to tunes by Stetsasonic, Naughty by Nature, Digital Underground, De La Soul, K7 and Coolio, this two-CD compilation charts the label's astonishing impact.

Various

Trojan Skinhead Reggae Box Set (2002)

Spanning the era from 1968-72, when British white kids pulled on their boots and braces and danced to Jamaican reggae, these three CDs of tight instrumentals, sweet rocksteady, stomps, chants and novelties celebrate the interracial spirit of the early skinhead movement without shrinking from the burgeoning violence of the scene.

Various

Tropicalia (2006)

This fantastic collection from late-60s Brazil shows the magic that can happen when different musical worlds fuse together. British psychedelic rock, American funk and the European avant garde merged with bossa nova to create fabulous international pop, with Os Mutantes, Caetano Veloso and Gal Costa leading the dizzying charge.

Various

Ze Records: Mutant Disco (1981)

When this compilation emerged, it made Ze the hippest label on the planet: its art-disco artistes combined witty lyrics and wayward funk to revolutionary effect. The two CDs of the 2003 reissue,

featuring Wheel Me Out by Was (Not Was) and Que Pasa/Me No Pop I by Coati Mundi, still possess an extraordinary charge.

Various

Velvet Tinmine: 20 Junk Shop Glam Raves (2003)

Sometimes, musical failures can tell you more about their era than successes hence this remarkable collection of flop glam rock. Bearded Lady and Iron Virgin were richly, agonisingly redolent of the grim reality of the early 70s in a way Roxy Music and Ziggy Stardust could never be.

Dino Valente

Dino Valente (1968)

A heady, swooshing set of soft-focus psych-folk from the vagabond, troubadour and loverman of the 60s New York folkie set. It's anyone's guess how many of his own tales were true that he grew up in a circus, that he wrote Hey Joe, that they just don't understand you like I do, bay-beh but the swooping luxuriance of these tremendous songs needs no qualification.

Van Der Graaf Generator

Pawn Hearts (1971)

Those who think of 70s prog as being largely a kind of cosy muso fantasy world are politely directed towards the forbidding gothic edifice of Pawn Hearts. Peter Hammill's convulsive, nightmarish songs are orchestrated with abrasive electric sax and keyboards, and the results are gloriously over the top.

Vangelis

Blade Runner (1982)

As essential to Blade Runner's eerie melancholy as the rain and neon were the neoclassical synthscapes of former Greek prog-rocker Vangelis. Blade Runner (End Titles) influenced techno, while the woozy Love Theme is so exquisitely sad you'll believe a replicant can cry.

Van Halen

Van Halen (1978)

Van Halen's first album redefined California music as surely as the Beach Boys did in the early 60s and the Laurel Canyon lot did a few years later. Out went any hint of sensitivity; in came the lurid excesses of cock rock. What set them apart from their inferior imitators was sheer force of personality.

Vanity 6

Vanity 6 (1982)

Vanity 6 was Prince's most lascivious fantasy made flesh. Named after the number of breasts in the band, who were rarely seen in anything but lingerie, their only album is a seriously good mix of sassy dance-funk and biting new-wave pop that is head and shoulders above the purple perv's other proteges.

Monica Vasconcelos & N-is 4

Gente (2004)

A modern Brazilian classic from a London band. N-is 4 spent a decade playing the jazz club circuit, and you can hear it in the sublime rhythmic understanding of acoustic guitar, saxophone and drums. Vasconcelos sings cool, beguiling lines over bossa nova, samba, choro and maracatu. Robert Wyatt's favourite new artist.

Sarah Vaughan

Sarah Vaughan (1954)

With a four-octave voice and the ability to sound as wistful as a flute, as sensuous as a tenor sax

or as powerful as an operatic diva, Vaughan was the classiest of acts. This set finds her with a musical equal trumpeter Clifford Brown on an exquisitely delicate set of brooding standards.

Suzanne Vega

Solitude Standing (1987)

Beautiful, intimate slice-of-life snapshots from the New York-based singer-songwriter, with lush pop sounds layering the acoustic folk of her debut. From the a cappella simplicity of Tom's Diner to the commercially successful Luka, where she speaks revealingly for an abused boy, this is a melodic evocation of quietly observed isolation.

Caetano Veloso

Definitive Collection (2003)

Nothing can be the definitive introduction to the man who manages to be Brazil's answer Bob Dylan, Stevie Wonder, Syd Barrett, Brian Wilson and Mick Jagger. But this is a decent start, taking us from his psych-rocking tropicalia of the late 60s to his latter-day experimental bossa nova work.

The Velvet Underground

White Light/White Heat (1968)

For all the talk of how many bands formed after hearing the Velvets, no one has ever really sounded anything like them. They ditched Warhol and Nico for this album, but kept things resolutely out-there tornadoes of rock'n'roll fuzz, strange tales, ghostly new kinds of melody, intoxicating drones. Beyond psychedelic, the Velvets were a whole new kind of new.

The Verve

A Northern Soul (1995)

The Verve's second album was overshadowed by its successor, Urban Hymns, but many fans see it as their masterpiece. Fuelled by ecstasy and by their own grandiose visions, A Northern Soul was a sprawling set of space-rock, all spidery guitar lines and grooves. But with the strings of History, it also hinted at the widescreen sound to come.

Edward Vesala

Ode to the Death of Jazz (1989)

Here is crusading Finnish drummer and composer Vesala's clearest vision for an ensemble music that doesn't showcase soloists or lean on jazz licks. His inspired ransacking of modern classical methods and his homeland's folk music occasionally hints at Gil Evans or Don Cherry, but his own evocative balance of freedom and organisation is at its core.

Ricardo Villalobos

Alcachofa (2003)

Ricardo Villalobos's genius lies in his ability to seduce the listener with as few tools as possible. The minimal techno of Alcachofa is sparse, unassuming stuff at first. It isn't long before the aqueous basslines, exquisitely judged melodic touches and the intricate detail of the tracks enrapture you: this is music to lose yourself in.

Gene Vincent

The Rock'N'Roll Collection (2004)

The leather-clad sweet Gene Vincent immortalised by Ian Dury was the antithesis of acceptable popular music in the 50s, and subsequently an influence on everyone from the early Beatles to the Fall. This compilation showcases his raw, untamed sound on tracks from the classic Be-Bop-a-Lula to Race With the Devil.

Violent Femmes

Violent Femmes (1982)

They sounded like the more chaotic younger brothers of Jonathan Richman's Modern Lovers, but the Violent Femmes' debut underwhelmed on its initial appearance, peaking at No 171 on the Billboard chart. It has since gained wider affection, aided by the timeless paean to teenage hormone overload that is college radio anthem Blister in the Sun.

Virgo

Virgo (1989)

The story of Virgo's album is as mysterious and sad as its contents. Chicago's Merwyn Saunders and Eric Lewis weren't even called Virgo. They recorded two deep house EPs under the names Virgo 4 and M.E. before vanishing. Compiled on a rare, erroneously titled album, the tracks suggested Saunders and Lewis were lavishly gifted: this was as wistful and beautiful as house music ever got.

Vitalic

OK Cowboy (2005)

With La Rock Part 01, Frenchman Pascal Arbez produced a dance track that was truly histrionic, a mutant techno both corrosive and beserk. His debut mixes synthetic rock with rave and an unexpected polka influence on two tracks. The dulcet Trahison is just enchanting.

Artists beginning with W

Thursday November 22, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

The Wailing Souls

Firehouse Rock (1980)

Dancehall producer Henry Junjo Lawes kickstarted reggae's modern era, but this veteran harmony group delivered great work under his aegis. A filler-free collection of moral parables, Firehouse Rock's sublime deportment owes much to the passionate vocal presence of Winston Matthews, a contemporary of Bob Marley whose class transcends the future sounds.

Tom Waits

Swordfishtrombones (1983)

This deconstruction job came just in time to re-engineer Waits's career for a weirder, more visual and visceral age. Crucial to this adventure, which set songs such as Underground and 16 Shells From a 30.6 in clanging soundscapes, were the musicians, including drummer Stephen Taylor Arvizu Hodges, percussionist Victor Feldman and Waits's clever wife, Kathleen Brennan.

Rick Wakeman

The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Round Table (1975)

A pivotal influence on Spinal Tap, this tour de force of unmitigated medieval-costume pomp-rock keyboard lunacy has to be heard once to witness how daft and pompous rock music got in the 1970s. With orchestras, synthesisers and even a school choir, the Yes man unleashes widdly-widdly odysseys about men wielding swords.

Scott Walker

Sings Jacques Brel (1981)

For those who find Scott Walker too forbidding and Jacques Brel too, well, foreign, here's the record to meet all your syphilis balladry needs. Walker caresses Mort Shuman's translations of the lyrics, which finally come alive for those who speak no French.

Was (Not Was)

Are You Ok? (1990)

Every album by non-brothers Don and David Was has featured a version of Out Come the Freaks, and this is no exception. When it comes to combining lyrical weirdness with musical grooves, few come near: check out the manic I Feel Better Than James Brown, Elvis's Rolls Royce (intoned by Leonard Cohen) and IBlew Up the United States.

The Waterboys

This Is the Sea (1985)

Containing the smash hit The Whole of the Moon, the third of the Waterboys' big music albums finally breached the mainstream. Its career-defining songs document the singer-guitarist's more consuming quest for a higher spiritual truth as he blazes away.

Muddy Waters

King of Chicago Blues (2006)

Louisiana native McKinley Morganfield only have moved to Chicago in 1943, but, as Muddy Waters, he defined the Windy City electric blues sound. This four-disc set tells most of his story, but omits the funk experiments that, while hated by blues purists, ensured that his legacy would live on in sample-based music.

Norma Waterson

Norma Waterson (1996)

Eliza Carthy's ma was just nudged out by Pulp for the Mercury music prize for this, her belated solo debut, released when she was 56. Such high-flying was thoroughly deserved here, Waterson's rubicund, lived-in voice is never capable of sounding anything other than utterly convincing, especially on God Loves a Drunk.

Chris Watson

Weather Report (2003)

Watson is one of the world's leading recorders of wildlife and natural phenomena, and here he edits his field recordings into a filmic narrative. The unearthly groaning of ice in an Icelandic glacier is a classic example of, in Watson's words, putting a microphone where you can't put your ears.

Weather Report

Black Market (1976)

This exhilarating album catches Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul's band at a crucial moment, changing drummers (halfway through the title track) and bassists (from the incredible Alfonso Johnson to the unbelievable Jaco Pastorius) to spectacular effect. Zawinul's tunes, such as Cannon Ball and the joyous title track, have hardly been bettered.

The Wedding Present

Seamonsters (1991)

Harnessing the confrontational muscle of producer Steve Albini to a lyricist obsessed with love's bitterness and bile, Seamonsters is one of the most excoriating, exhilarating British indie albums of its decade. The guitars are strung with barbed wire; David Gedge sings as if gargling acid; every note seethes and bleeds.

Gillian Welch

Time (The Revelator) (2001)

Accompanied by David Rawlings, an unassuming man who makes the banjo sound like the fiercest instrument in rock'n'roll, Gillian Welch flays country music and hangs its skin on the washing line. Their third album together ruminates duskily and sagely on life's essentials: freedom, poverty, memory and the chorus-girl wonder of Elvis.

Paul Weller**Wild Wood** (1993)

With his second solo album, Weller established the parameters for the lengthy career that followed. Introspective and beset by thirtysomething uncertainty, yet rockingly assured, *Wild Wood* rescued him from the fallow patch that followed a misbegotten dance period in the late 80s.

Wendy & Bonnie**Genesis** (1969)

The teenage Flower sisters teamed up with cool jazzier Gary McFarland to produce an album knee-deep in Laurel Canyon atmospheric, though organ groover *Let Yourself Go* shows they also knew their way around a Sunset Strip dancefloor.

Kanye West**The College Dropout** (2004)

Having catapulted to prominence as a producer by making the best beats on Jay-Z's brilliant *Blueprint* album, Kanye picked up the mic and attempted to turn himself into a global superstar. Matching literate, funny and confident rhymes with that peerless ability to make belting tunes, he assured his rapid ascent in the rap hierarchy.

The West Coast Pop Art Experimental Band**Part One** (1967)

Three California teenagers allow an odd millionaire to join their band, so he can meet girls. He gets to play the tambourine and secures them a deal with Reprise. The result? One of the most beautiful albums of psychedelic pop. *I Won't Hurt You* is minimal and spooky; *Transparent Day* is a joyous Byrdsian romp. It's miles better than many of the supposed classics of the period.

The Whatnauts**Message From a Black Man** (1996)

The title of this compilation is misleading. Best known for their team-up with the Moments on 1975's sublime single *Girls*, this Baltimore symphonic soul troupe specialised less in socially conscious R&B, à la Marvin Gaye, and more in submissive-male pleas for affection, such as the US hit *I'll Erase Away the Pain*.

Kenny Wheeler**Gnu High** (1975)

UK trumpet legend Kenny Wheeler has played everything from big-band swing to free-improv and become a Gil Evans-inspired composer whose work is played worldwide. Wheeler's captivating, dolorous writing, pristine sound and unique phrasing joins some scything Keith Jarrett solos on the pianist's last session as a sideman.

Barry White**Stone Gon'** (1973)

Only five tracks long, this was singer, composer and producer White's masterpiece, taking Isaac Hayes' orchestrated soul to new heights of stretched-out symphonic ecstasy. *Never Never Gonna Give Ya Up* was the hit, but it's on *Hard to Believe* and the eight-minute *Girl It's True* that White and arranger Gene Page achieve pre-coital perfection.

Bergen White**For Women Only** (2004)

Until it was reissued by Rev-Ola, *For Women Only* had languished in obscurity for 34 years. White was a highly regarded Nashville arranger for everyone from Elvis to Duane Eddy when he recorded this soft-rock marvel, with its self-penned songs and covers of baroque obscurities by David Gates and Townes Van Zandt.

James White & the Blacks

Off White (1979)

The initiator of high-IQ booty-shaking, James Siegfried aka James White/James Chance, the darling of New York's no wave fused free jazz and hard funk to create disco-punk. It's best exemplified here by Contort Yourself, the disfigured love-child of Lou Reed and George Clinton, and Almost Black, which sounds like John Coltrane jamming with Bootsy Collins.

White Stripes

White Blood Cells (2001)

White Blood Cells captured the sound of a band gathering speed. The White Stripes meant little on either side of the Atlantic until 2001, when one of those collective bursts of British eccentricity saw them come over to play a couple of low-key dates in specialist clubs and leave as the officially declared Saviours of Rock'n'Roll. The Stripes' rise coincided with a revival of interest in stripped-down rock music, and it happened as they moved from blues purism to something more inclusive. Where its two predecessors had been dedicated to Son House and Blind Willie McTell, and included covers of the traditional St James Infirmary Blues and Robert Johnson's Stop Breaking Down, White Blood Cells was poppier - more country. It was dedicated to Loretta Lynn. Its songs - including the singles Dead Leaves and the Dirty Ground, Hotel Yorba, We're Going to Be Friends, and Fell in Love With a Girl - were growling and concise, but there was something brilliantly unknowable about them, at a time where rock needed some mystery. Their air of strangeness was bolstered by Jack and Meg White's relationship (were they siblings? were they divorced?), by their red-and-white colour scheme, and by their almost Dogme approach to making music. This would be their breakthrough record. It was followed by a bigger one, Elephant, which signalled a swift progression to stardom. But at this moment in 2001, as you can hear on White Blood Cells, the White Stripes were a band discovering in themselves a newfound, tightly sprung style of playing, mixing sweetness and savagery with quiet ferocity. Laura Barton

The Who

Meaty Beaty Big and Bouncy (1971)

The definition of powerpop. Before Roger Daltrey got a perm and began to growl, the Who's forte was tough beats with a sly, pervy humour that pretty much disappeared from their repertoire in the 70s. Beyond the songwriting, marvel at pop's least obvious, and most impressive, rhythm section.

Wilco

Yankee Hotel Foxtrot (2002)

By their fourth album, Jeff Tweedy's once stoutly country-rock group had spread their wings. Frazzled Krautrock, shortwave static and Tweedy's lovelorn melodicism formed the basis of Yankee Hotel Foxtrot, to stunning effect. Mysteriously, the group were dropped from their record label before it was released but that noise? It's a group having the last laugh.

Hank Williams

40 Greatest Hits (1978)

Some have claimed that the songs written by Hank Williams constitute the greatest individual contribution to the American songbook. This collection makes a persuasive case: 40 peerless songs of loneliness, longing and heartache, sung by someone who sounded as though he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Lucinda Williams

Car Wheels on a Gravel Road (1998)

A singer-songwriter who mixed country with rock and blues in her often pained, personal and emotional songs, Williams has released remarkably few albums in a career that started in the late 70s but they are all worth hearing. This set won her a Grammy award thanks to songs as good as Right in Time and Drunken Angel.

Paul Williams**Someday Man** (1970)

Paul Williams went from bit-part actor in the 60s (The Chase) to million-selling songwriter in the 70s (We've Only Just Begun, Rainy Days and Mondays). This album, arranged by Roger Nichols, saw him putting himself in the shop window with exquisite and gently philosophical songs.

Robbie Williams**Greatest Hits** (2004)

If all of Williams' albums up to 2004 had been condensed into this single disc, he would have been pronounced a pop genius. Almost nothing is beyond his abilities: ballads (Angels), orchestral pop (Millennium), skittish dance-rock (Kids), angsty instospection (No Regrets). Flashes of brilliance like these are the reason that the next Robbie Williams has a hard act to follow.

Cassandra Wilson**Travellin' Miles** (1998)

In which the husky-voiced southern belle pays tribute to various eras of Miles Davis modal Miles, chamber Miles, electric Miles using his spare melodies as the basis for poetic reinterpretation. Olu Dara's cornet retains a vestigial Milesian presence, but the project rests entirely on Wilson's deliciously creamy voice.

Amy Winehouse**Back to Black** (2006)

Winehouse shot to superstar status with the help of her fabulously well-connected producer, Mark Ronson, and a veteran backing band who gave Back to Black its timeless sound. The soap opera has overshadowed the work in recent months, but Rehab alone is a jaw-dropping combination of modern sensibilities and old-fashioned styles.

Wire**Chairs Missing** (1978)

The album that best accommodates Wire's art-school conceptualism and the emotional undercurrents that made their songs so durable, Chairs Missing feels incredibly contemporary. Or it would do, if any 21st-century group could evoke a fraction of its gravity with pop music so gnarled and simplistic, yet so remote.

Bill Withers**Still Bill** (1972)

A stammerer who found he was able to communicate best through song, Withers made his name as a writer. This third album contains two of his most epochal and best-loved compositions Lean on Me and Who Is He (And What Is He to You)? but the blend of patient, understated, insistently funky acoustic playing is just as vital.

Wizzard**Wizzard Brew** (1973)

Roy Wood's post-Move career is synonymous with I Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday, crazy makeup and gorilla costumes. However, Wizzard's lost debut is a berserk amalgam of 50s pop, metal, cabaret and the avant garde the sort of thing only a true British pop maverick adventurer could dream up.

Stevie Wonder**Innervisions** (1973)

It's either a miracle or a crime that you can get one of the most important albums of the 70s for a fiver. The third album of Wonder's phenomenal 1970s run is an effortlessly melodic, socially conscious song cycle. And he played every note, including the drums.

World Party

Bang (1993)

Karl Wallinger left the Waterboys and founded a whimsical dictatorship. Bang raids the 60s to craft earnest tunes that talk of kings, empires and revolution, owing much to the Beatles and referencing Bertrand Russell. Eclectic, philosophical funky pop with a social conscience the size of the planet, this is proselytising while partying.

Link Wray

Early Recordings (1978)

Imagine an instrumental being banned for being likely to incite violence that happened to Link Wray's Rumble in 1958. Wray truly had a gift for making the electric guitar sound delinquent. This compendium of his best-known material proves it.

Wu-Tang Clan

Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers) (1993)

It originated from Staten Island, but this album established a dynasty more reminiscent of imperial China. Soaked in the mythology of martial-arts movies, here the Wu offer credible street reportage, but all the while creating their own legend. This remains, as the band were then: Raw, with no trivia/ Raw like cocaine straight from Bolivia.

Robert Wyatt

Rock Bottom (1974)

You don't need to know that Rock Bottom was the first record Robert Wyatt made after breaking his spine to grasp its remarkable aura of pain and redemption. With Pink Floyd's Nick Mason producing, Wyatt plays keyboards with giddy abandonment and warbles surreal love lyrics to his wife-to-be, Alfie. Unconventionally uplifting.

Artists beginning with X

Thursday November 22, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

X

Los Angeles (1980)

Only LA could have produced a punk band like X: this is the music that would have played in the minds of the characters in Less Than Zero. It's cynical, contemptuous and sophisticated there's no sloganeering here. It's also unashamed to suck up to the biz: it's produced by the Doors' Ray Manzarek, and there's a straight cover of Soul Kitchen. A real curio, even it leaves you feeling sullied.

Richard X

Presents His X-Factor, Vol 1 (2003)

Dry northerner Richard X (his surname remains a mystery) nurtured a dream of how pop might sound if austere 80s synth-pop married warm-blooded 90s R&B. Polishing two underground bootlegs into hits for Liberty X and the Sugababes, while exploring new hybrids with Jarvis Cocker and Tiga, he brought it all tingling to life.

X-Ray Spex

Germ Free Adolescents (1978)

With anti-fashion icon Poly Styrene as frontwoman, and a 15-year-old Lora Logic on sax, X-Ray

Spex offered neon DIY rock'n'roll that proved punk wasn't all self-harm and safety pins. The shrieking Identity and IAm a Poseur were unrivalled anti-consumerism anthems.

XTC

The Compact XTC: The Singles 1978-1985 (2003)

There are perfect albums in the XTC catalogue. But they were also a great singles band, and in their singles their development can be most clearly traced, from the jerky new wave of This Is Pop?, through the very English alienation of Making Plans for Nigel, through the brash pop of Sgt Rock, to the pastoral glory of Love on a Farmboy's Wages.

Artists beginning with Y

Thursday November 22, 2007

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The Yardbirds

The Yardbirds (aka Roger the Engineer) (1966)

The forgotten men of British 60s rock were among its prime movers. Their sole studio album of originals shows them combining R&B with nascent psychedelia to thrilling effect, sounding less callow than the Stones at the same point.

Yazoo

Upstairs at Eric's (1982)

The strange coupling of Alison Moyet's brassy vocals and Vince Clarke's minimalist electro-pop worked wonders on their debut LP. Moyet's bold Essex burr introduced soul to the machine, filling these fraught, jagged songs of broken hearts, runaways and lonely rooms with passion and sadness.

Yellow Magic Orchestra

Solid State Survivor (1979)

Featuring Ryuichi Sakamoto, Yellow Magic Orchestra were the Japanese Kraftwerk: the glistening proto-synthpop of Technopolis evoked Japan's high-rise futurescapes as brilliantly as the German electro pioneers did European travel. This second album includes a droll cover version of the Beatles' Day Tripper, as well as the gasp-inducingly lovely Insomnia and Rydeen.

Lester Young

Complete Aladdin Recordings (1995)

The sound of tenor saxophonist Lester Young was once described as soundless laughter the epitome of jazz cool in the pre-bop era, and an inspiration to Charlie Parker. Young's patience and oblique inventiveness is at its best here on these 1940s recordings.

Neil Young

Tonight's the Night (1975)

Midway through a track called Mellow My Mind, there is a moment that encapsulates Neil Young's extraordinary seventh solo album. In the hands of one of Young's early-70s west coast contemporaries, Mellow My Mind would be a laid-back paean to the pleasures of takin' it easy - but Young and his band have clearly been takin' it rather too easy before recording began, so, like everything else on Tonight's the Night, it lurches and flails disconcertingly rather than flowing smoothly. No Pavarotti at the best of times, Young slurs his words out of tune, but when he reaches a line about how a lonesome whistle "ain't got nothing on those feelings that I've had", he can't sing it at all: his voice cracks into a sob. This, you're left feeling, is about as emotionally raw as rock music can get. Tonight's the Night grew out of a tequila-fuelled musical wake for roadie

Bruce Berry and Crazy Horse guitarist Danny Whitten, which produced its profoundly affecting songs, peopled by Vietnam vets, murderers and ghosts. On its release, the public was baffled. David Crosby openly berated Young for playing "dark shit", but Young was aware that the hippy dream had curdled. "I'm not going back to Woodstock for a while," he sings on Roll Another Number for the Road, his voice dripping with sarcasm and contempt. He would not remain a solitary voice for long. Barely 12 months after Tonight's the Night's release, a Neil Young fan would make his first television appearance. "Woodstock generation," Johnny Rotten snarled, by way of introduction to the Sex Pistols' performance of Anarchy in the UK, "get off your arse".
Alexis Petridis

Young Marble Giants

Colossal Youth (1980)

The starkest and quietest post-punk album, Colossal Youth is a triumph of less-is-more. Recorded by the Cardiff band in three and a half days at a cost of £100, it is remarkable for the dub-spacious gap between Stuart Moxham's punchy guitar rhythms, his brother Phillip's weird bass patterns and Alison Statton's eerily blank vocals.

Timi Yuro

Something Bad on My Mind (1968)

The petite Yuro's voice was unlike any other Italian-American, incredibly loud and decidedly adult. This, her best set, was cut in London. It'll Never Be Over for Me is a tearduct-busting northern soul hit, while Interlude (written by Truffaut score-writer Georges Delerue) is a candidate for the saddest record in the world.

Artists beginning with Z

Thursday November 22, 2007

Guardian Unlimited

Frank Zappa/Ensemble Modern

The Yellow Shark (1993)

When Germany's Ensemble Modern prepared to play The Yellow Shark, they went beyond the call of duty, taking unpaid holiday time to rehearse with Zappa, as the (dying) composer "put the eyebrows" on the music. The album is a posthumous tribute to Zappa's lifelong commitment to "putting little black dots on music paper".

Joe Zawinul

Faces & Places (2002)

You can't summarise Zawinul in any recording, let alone one but this studio album, made in his 70th year, shows his restless creativity and energy as well as any. Tracks such as Borges Buenos Aires and Rooftops of Vienna feature a cast of fabulous musicians. It's world music, in a world Zawinul made his own.

The Zombies

Odessey and Oracle (1968)

The Zombies' only album its title misspelt thanks to a lazy sleeve designer is a gorgeous monument to late-60s pop. Starting with a glorious letter-in-song to a lover in jail and a story about a girl no one loves, it features beautiful vocal harmonies; the songs shine with style and bristle with lyrical substance.

John Zorn

The Big Gundown (1984)

The jazz-punk maverick pays tribute to and mercilessly trashes the music of Ennio Morricone. Zorn handles his guest musicians like a film director, drafting in Toots Thielemans for some plangent harmonica, Big John Hammond for funky Hammond organ duties and some suitably maverick vocalists (Diamanda Galas and Mike Patton).

ZZ Top

Tres Hombres (1973)

The hit years in the 80s were dark years for ZZ Top fans, distraught at the band shedding the Texas boogie of their early albums. Tres Hombres was the best of those: crackling with spice and vivid songwriting, but with real rock punch, too.