

top ten albums (in no particular order)

Contributed by chris d.
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Below is something I originally did at the request of a French writer (whose name – forgive me! – now escapes my recollection) for a volume collecting lists of Top Ten Albums by a vast gaggle of both very well-known and comparatively-unknown (such as yours truly) pop stars and musicians. Normally, I don't like to do lists like this, but I thought, what-the-hell, why not?

Volunteers by Jefferson Airplane

This is not only the quintessential Jefferson Airplane album, it is also the quintessential album from any psychedelic-cum-political rock band, seamlessly integrating melody, hard rock, psychedelic guitar work (Jorma Kaukonen is at his most brilliant here), simultaneously complex yet simply-executed and startlingly original sonic tapestries (“Hey Frederick,” “Eskimo Blue Day”), anthems (“We Can Be Together,” “Wooden Ships” and especially “Volunteers”), ballads (“The Good Shepherd”) and just fluid, transcendental pop (“Turn My Life Down”). It's uncompromisingly hard-edged, heartbreakingly melodic, deeply felt and totally exhilarating (as was much of their uneven but almost as good Crown of Creation album). Hard-to-believe that they pulled this off when everyone was supposedly indulging in so many drugs (by the way, their version of “Wooden Ships” is far superior to the CSN&Y version).

Crazy World of Arthur Brown

For some reason, Arthur Brown makes me think of other different songwriter/musicians like Captain Beefheart, Jim Morrison and Dr. John, even though he really does not sound anything like any one of them on their own. Sometimes his music and his lyrics do strike the same kinds of chords in me as those guys. This is one of the great forgotten albums of the sixties. The musicianship is quirky, melodic, abrasive, jazzy, bluesy, psychedelic but still rock‘n roll. Brown's vocals do, at times, sound like an unholy cross between Little Richard, Jim Morrison, Beefheart, Dr. John, James Brown, Ian Anderson, Bon Scott and some as yet unknown, demented heavy metal singer – his vocals really are like no other. Brilliant. The songs, especially “Nightmare,” “Fire Poem,” “Fire,” “Rest Cure” and “Child of My Kingdom” are indelibly memorable and were incredibly influential on me. And despite rumors that Brown did not like the strings and horns that producers Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp added to some of the songs, I have to say that it is, in part, these extra touches that push this album up into the ionosphere. The horns and strings are crazy and demonic and very scary – they are not lush, muzaky-sounding arrangements, but open the songs up like something out of an uneasy and unforgettable dream reverie.

Lady In Satin by Billie Holliday

Nearly everything by Billie Holliday is a masterpiece. But this album, done just a year and a half before her death, holds a special place for me. The contrast between Billie's ravaged, yet never more evocative voice with Ray Ellis's luxurious, almost too homogenized strings/wall-of-sound is truly haunting. The songs, especially “Violets For My Furs,” “I'm A Fool To Want To You,” “You Don't Know What Love Is,” “I Get Along Without You Very Well,” “The End Of A Love Affair” and the way Billie sings them – it's hard to explain, but these kinds of songs with these kinds of performances are just not that common in America, even in the blues and jazz medium. These are the kinds of tragic love songs sung the way the great French music hall masters (like Edith Piaf, Yves Montand, Jacques Brel) used to sing them, but beyond. As far as real things go, this is as real as it gets. If you have not heard them, it is hard to understand what I mean. Imagine yourself not only being lonely, spurned by your lover, but also being a hopeless addict and knowing it, walking down dark, rainy and empty autumn New York City streets. That's the feeling you get. So painful it is hard to listen, but sublimely beautiful.

Strange Days by The Doors

I love their first album just as much - in fact individual songs from that first album like "Break On Through," "Soul Kitchen" and "The End" I like probably even more - but for some reason this second release works for me better as an entire album. There is the same kind of flowing, strikingly original musicianship, intoxicating facility with memorable melody and simultaneously silky and raw Jim Morrison vocals. However the psychedelic hangover that is a combination of leftover beat generation hipness, of late 19th century French poetic imagery, of nostalgia for lonely carnival midways and Venice Beach boardwalks around midnight that was present on their debut LP, is amped up to an even greater degree here on this album. I especially love "People Are Strange," "Strange Days," "You're Lost Little Girl," "Unhappy Girl" and "When the Music's Over".

Velvet Underground And Nico

This is primitively neolithic in production, but that is kind of the point. I believe the I-don't-give-a-damn attitude was partly intentional and partly incompetence - which, in retrospect, all works to its advantage. And the simultaneously sparse instrumentation and dense sound of the production also, as in many do-it-yourself punk albums of the late 1970s, creates a raw intensity and cloudy urban mysticism that it might not have had otherwise (to this degree, anyway). Lou Reed wrote some of his greatest songs here (although I have an equal love for "Candy Says," "Pale Blue Eyes," "Some Kind Of Love," "What Goes On," "Sister Ray," "White Light, White Heat," "Sweet Jane" and "Rock & Roll" - all from other albums). There was no other group with this kind of jaded, underground urban sensibility in the 1960s. They were, as the cliché goes, way ahead of their time. This is New York City painted as a hellish playground of vice for the living dead - or perhaps for humans almost dead who are somehow still managing to hold onto a darkly sardonic sense of humor and a barely perceptible hint of doomed, 19th century-era romanticism. The simultaneous play of subtle sarcasm, resigned fatalism, quietly unacknowledged despair and transcendental sensitivity in these songs, especially "I'm Waiting For My Man," "Venus In Furs," "All Tomorrow's Parties," "Heroin," "There She Goes Again" and "I'll Be Your Mirror" is sublime - all couched in amusingly hip swagger to disguise the tragedy of repeatedly broken hearts. I'm not always a fan of John Cale's electric violin, but on "Venus In Furs" it melds seamlessly, beautifully with the guitars played by Lou Reed and Sterling Morrison into a chilling sonic testament of erotic torment.

Live Yardbirds! Featuring Jimmy Page

Like the Loretta Lynn album below, this record is now almost impossible to hear, but for different reasons (legal, I guess) and I imagine Jimmy Page or someone else in The Led Zeppelin machine have had a say in its unavailability. Criminal! This is perhaps vocalist Keith Relf's finest hour. There is an aching soulfulness in his singing that, along with Page's playing, make the versions of gems like "Heartful Of Soul" and "You're A Better Man Than I" the definitive ones. Also Page's instrumental "White Summer" is a standout as are the blitzkrieg monoliths of the hard-charging "Train Kept A Rollin'" and "I'm A Man". Has all the punch, gutsiness and bottom of Led Zeppelin IV (a hard rock heaviness The Yardbirds too often lacked in their studio work) yet it also has The Yardbird's uncanny grace, romantic sensitivity and soulfulness (qualities Led Zeppelin often lacked) - the missing link between the 2 bands.

The Supremes Anthology

The quintessential girl band, black or white, and the best Motown band ever. They had the synthesis, especially in their rise to fame, between street level credibility, pure pop music/radio single perfection, arrangements that were simultaneously sparse & bare bones and still all-encompassing wall-of-sound. Whatever you think of Diana Ross now, in the 1960s in her prime, she was IT! Some of my favorite R&B pop songs ever, especially "Back In My Arms Again," "Nothing But Heartaches," "Stop In The Name Of Love," "Love Is Like An Itching In My Heart," "Forever Came Today," "Come See About Me" … I don't have room to list them all. Diana Ross was the best female R&B/pop music singer in her day and really has still not been surpassed (I'm not talking about pure R&B or pure blues/jazz where a number of other female singers like Billie Holliday, Etta James, et. al. surpass her). Listening to The Supremes, one can hear how much black pop/R&B has degenerated since then - with The Supremes and Diana there is no hanging on and stretching notes to ridiculous lengths, warbling in absurdly long, comically awful duration - No! None of that vocal

masturbation you see from singers today obsessed like demented opera divas showing off their range. With these songs there is economy, straightforwardness and memorable, unique melody. The songs come to the point, blow your mind and are over.

Let It Bleed by The Rolling Stones

I love every single Rolling Stones album to one degree or another, from the first, England's Newest Hitmakers, through Exile On Main Street — then not so much at all after that (except for the stirring, momentary throwback to earlier greatness, "Start Me Up" on Tattoo You). But Let It Bleed is the masterpiece at the pinnacle. Was there ever a more ferociously thrilling rock song than "Gimme Shelter"? It still gives me chills. Although to some degree these songs have been overplayed to death on the radio and in movie soundtracks, I still remember the awe when hearing them for the first time, especially "Gimme Shelter," "Midnight Rambler" (the scariest weird guitar on any major rock release) and "You Can't Always Get What You Want". My only complaint is that they did not put the hard rock single version of "Honky Tonk Women" on here instead of the country version (which I don't care for as much).

Loretta Lynn Sings

Loretta Lynn's first album has never been available on CD and don't look for it anytime soon because the record company marketing people would just as soon make you believe her career began with merely decent stuff like "Coal Miner's Daughter" and gimmicky tunes like "Fist City." But this first album of Loretta's is the real deal made shortly after she came straight down from the hills and hollows. This has some of her most genuine, aching pure songs. Stuff like "The Minute You're Gone," "Girl I Am Now," "World of Forgotten People" and especially the haunting "I Walked Away From The Wreck" are masterpieces. It is a travesty that this is nearly impossible to find (and only on old, used, beat-up vinyl)!

Raw Power by Iggy & The Stooges tied with High Time by MC5

Two of the greatest rock and roll albums ever, going beyond mere rock, as many have said, to "punk rock". Nihilistic, but uplifting. There had been punk-sounding stuff before by the Stones, Them, the Standells and the Sonics, but The Stooges and MC5 amped it up beyond belief in energy level, exhilarating runaway train sonic pyrotechnics and sheer audacity. Both albums blew my mind when I first heard them, and they certainly were the first to take things to this brain-frying, transcendental level (although The Stooges' own earlier Funhouse was nearly as good). They still have not been surpassed, though The Sex Pistols, The Saints and The New York Dolls came close with their first albums. For the record, I prefer the original Bowie mix of the Raw Power album to the one Iggy did later (which was fine in its own right but just nowhere near as dynamic — listen to when James Williamson's guitar solo comes in on "Shake Appeal" and you'll see what I mean — when it explodes out of nowhere on Bowie's mix, it is like getting hit by an exploding blast furnace of sound). MC5's High Time, like Volunteers by Jefferson Airplane, is as exhilaratingly anarchic, tear-down-the-walls beatific as it gets — I dare you to listen to "Miss Anne," "Baby Won't Ya," "Future Now" and "Over and Over" and not be moved to believe that anything is possible, and, yes, we can, each and everyone of us, even change the world!

And in no particular order, the runners-up are (boy, it was hard not putting some of these in the top ten):

Heaven Is In Your Mind by Traffic, Sshhh! and Cricklewood Green by Ten Years After, Them, Living for You by Al Green, Graveyard Blues by John Lee Hooker, King Ink & Junkyard by The Birthday Party, Wild Gift & Los Angeles by X, Payin' the Dues by The Hellcopters, 8 Arms to Hold You by Veruca Salt, Etta James Rocks the House, Steppenwolf's first three albums, Lay Down (Candles in the Rain) by Melanie, Those Were The Days complete mega set of Cream, Surrealistic Pillow & Crown of Creation by the Jefferson Airplane, Never Mind The Bollocks by The Sex Pistols, Straight From The Heart by Ann Peebles, Funhouse by The Stooges, Safe As Milk by Captain Beefheart (aka on CD as Captain Beefheart At His Best), New York Dolls first album, Black Sabbath's first & second albums, Blue Matter by Savoy Brown, Brain Capers and All the Young Dudes by Mott the Hoople, The Sonics Greatest Hits, Highway to Hell & Back in Black by AC/DC, Shotgun Wedding & Honeymoon In Red albums by Lydia Lunch (w/ Rowland Howard), The Velvet Underground & White Light/White Heat by The Velvet Underground, nearly anything & everything by Hank Williams, nearly everything by Patsy Cline, everything by Johnny Cash on Sun Records, The Cold Hard Facts of Life by Porter Wagoner, Gris-Gris by Dr. John The Night Tripper, Songs The Lord Taught Us by The

Cramps, Horses & Radio Ethiopia by Patti Smith, Motor-Cycle by Lotti Golden, Fire Of Love by The Gun Club, Live At The Witch Trials by The Fall, Days of Wine and Roses by The Dream Syndicate, Joy Division's Closer (w/ single 'Love will tear us apart'), The Clash's first album (the American release with all the single sides such as 'Complete Control'), Mesmerizer by The Lipstick Killers, Gravity Talks by Green on Red, This Was..., Stand Up & Benefit by Jethro Tull, Electric Ladyland by Jimi Hendrix, Quicksilver Messenger Service's first & second albums, American Beauty by The Grateful Dead, Brave New World by the Steve Miller Band, Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere & After the Goldrush by Neil Young, Otis Redding Sings Soul Ballads, Nico's The Marble Index, Led Zeppelin's first 4 albums, The Kinks' Muswell Hillbillies, Mitch Ryder Live, Spirit's first album and their 12 Dreams of Dr. Sardonicus, David Bowie's Man Who Sold the World, Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane & Diamond Dogs, Lou Reed's Transformer, Berlin & Coney Island Baby, The Germs' (GI), The Saints' Stranded, Tim Buckley's Lorca, Rory Gallagher's Deuce, Songs of Leonard Cohen and Songs of Love and Hate by Leonard Cohen. Plus all early albums by Howling Wolf, Muddy Waters, James Brown, Little Willie John and Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. And I haven't even scratched the surface of 1950s jazz, which should be accorded a completely separate category of my favorite greats (that would include works by Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Chet Baker, Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, Peggy Lee, et. al)

...and of course I'm sure I'll realize soon that I've left out at least a dozen more that should have been included...

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