



Elliott Smith
New Moon
Kill Rock Stars

Elliott Smith played acoustic guitar like flowing water. His peerless playing envelops you in melody and polytones, rhythms churning whether he was droning, strumming or intricately finger-picking his course forward. He flowed through chord changes, elegantly linking seventh chords to perfectly fuse major and minor keys, seamlessly drawing moods at once sad and beautiful, and beautiful because they were sad.

Smith sonically tapped emotions more effectively than anyone. His songs were more moving, more fully fledged than any singer-songwriter's. He truly was the Dylan of his generation. That's because he spoke the language: His character sketches of despair and longing were extremely intimate, street-driven, autobiographical and plain-spoken. Unadorned by flowery metaphor, they penetrated the core of human emotions and relations. Lyrics seem lifted verbatim from Smith's conversations—whether internal or sotto voce—with friends, lovers, enemies. His whole discography is essential listening.

New Moon, a posthumous compilation of 24 previously unreleased songs is good as any introduction to this singular artist: Tracks open portals into fully rendered moments set amid undulating melody and warm buzz, with Smith's classical/Beatles-informed arrangements keeping things constantly interesting, always poignant and elegantly whole. Dry-throated, plaintive vocals crack with emotion and surf tidal, heart-massaging rhythms. Junkie laments ("High Times"); doomed lover narrative ("Almost Over"); sleigh-bell love songs ("Seen How Things Are Hard"); self-recriminations ("Go By"); He breaks our heart.



White Stripes
Icky Thump
Warner Bros. Records

Bands like the White Stripes create new vibes by laying down modern sounds over a foundation of traditional forms: Left narrowly around the core of sonic implication are Delta drones, Memphis boogie, Rust-Belt soul. They resonate nearly imperceptibly in the spaces between beats, their presence mostly suggested.

What fans always liked about the White Stripes is the mix of Meg White's loopy-goopy drum work with Jack White's tightly-wound, fuzz-tone. The open-bodied drumming and clipped guitar create a loping, circular throb—a third-element buzz that suggests the aforementioned grooves.

Many say *Icky Thump* is the White Stripes returning to their roots (guitars out front, less piano). But what predominates is a '70s, medieval, prog-rock vibe that variously ebbs toward an FM-dial Blue Cheer or Guess Who.

Better moments include the flanged, Zeppelin guitars and floor-tom beats of "I'm Slowly Turning Into You" and "Catch Hell Blues."

But mind the Mingus question: Back in the day, critics praised Charlie M.'s genius compositions, but wondered publicly whether the cat could swing. Well, let me tell you: Charles Mingus swung, hard. But does Jack White groove?

That's up to predilection: Like, does a guitar-drums combo require multiple-sectioned song structures, or a more refined discipline to simple auricular dynamics? And, when do chord changes become superfluous, obvious attempts at directional novelty? That last question lingers.



Björk

Volta
Atlantic

Branches bending, water sloshing up onshore, foghorns calling in harmony like choruses of tubas: Inspiration for the songs and sound collages on *Volta* seem heavily drawn from Björk's experience appearing in "Drawing Restraint 9," a surreal cinematic odyssey she embarked upon with her partner—the film's director—artist Matthew Barney. In the movie, the two board a whaling ship, and engage in an intricate mating ritual in which they morph into aquatic merpeople.

Half the fun is getting there: Synthesized horns retain a rising, heightened state throughout, like that of leaning on the bow-lip of a ship moving swift through the water at night. Always the horns, melodically following Björk's lyrical lines, harmonize in sustained triads, and ascend and descend in three-note runs, suggesting an elongated, peaking wavelength of buzzing, sated joy, and returned longing.

"I've lost my origin, and I don't want to find it again," Björk sings on "Wanderlust," coyly asking later with a whisper: "Can you spot a pattern?" Yes: Insatiable curiosity from a precocious Icelandic girl-spirit. There's the brutal, punch-in-the-kisser beat of "Innocence." Taiko drums pound out the pinnacle on "The Dull Flame of Desire." A burbling, chime-like shamisen buoys the Sapphic embrace of "I See Who You Are."

"Set your clock to the moon": Björk is at the peak of her creative powers here.



WILCO
Sky Blue Sky
Nonesuch

America (the country), plus Wilco, equals America, for real. Meaning, the band filters and summons the sore soul of the American experience like no other. The talent of front-man and songwriter Jeff Tweedy—healthier this time around, but more autobiographical—has always been to show how one man's perception can go countrywide.

Bold, plaintive and honest, *Sky Blue Sky* documents the domestic blues ache, stirring a hotpot of hazel-eyed, lo-fi soul grooves with T.Rex crescendos. Layered guitars, gemstone leads and Fender Rhodes pour into a melodic, reverberating whole—like the smooth buzz of a modern train—joyfully hijacked at speed by the incendiary, single-coil, precision-mayhem of the inimitable Nels Cline.

The band syncs seamlessly on this record—at once crystalline, dirt-flecked and soul-rich. The ambience of the room is palpable on "Please Be Patient With Me," a softly-plucked acoustic number about cautioning a lover: "When I'm not well/I can't tell."

"Shake it Off" is a Fender Rhodes driven, tick-tock groove that cedes to the band's storefront, gate-slam backbeat and the sweeping, sliding growl of Cline's Jazzmaster. Same goes for the countrified, major-key Stones' soul of "Hate it Here."

It's our guess Tweedy was thinking about his family, versus his audience, when he wrote for the opening track, the lines, "maybe... the clouds will roll away...., maybe I won't be so afraid... Either way, I'm going to stay right, for you." We're sincerely thankful, either way.



Various Artist
Hyphy Hitz
TVT Records

Anyone unfamiliar with the hyphy scene of the Bay Area: Clue-up! You've been ghost ridin' the whip, and you forgot to dance! Let's get straight to the point. Everybody: Click up and crank *Hyphy Hitz*. You must immediately own this music.

This is hip-hop flavor like no other: Way zanier than Southern crunk, and just as weirdly funky as London Grime, but with a much less hurried beat, hyphy is a psychedelic, up-tempo synth-fueled acid trip propelled by hyper-smart spitters with a wicked sense of humor. A stellar example of the vast territory over which hip hop can grow anew, it beats all scenes.

Hyphy's brimming with wide smiles, supreme styles, (hilarious parenthetical hollabacks) and peaceable partying. There's a non-judgmental embracing of how others kick it, too. As Oakland group Team tells it: "From the ghetto to the 'burbs, I make 'em all rock, from the rebels to the nerds."

Check the minor-key xylophone and quantum gravity beat of "Stunner Shades," from Shake Da Mayor. It is like good advice about rockin' style from a smart, cool older brother: "...Little kids, they wanna be like me... man, I'm Shake Da Mayor: You can't be like me! Be yourself. Let me give you a tip: Make sure that your stunners got a master fit... put your stunner shades on!"