

The best there is

Kirby Ferguson reduces a life in music to 20 slackly written reviews

Astral Weeks

Van Morrison

Astral Weeks is like nothing heard before or after: as heart-wrenching as the greatest blues and soul, with the grace and eloquence of classical and the absorbing introspection of jazz. It's a staggeringly visionary work, especially considering what Morrison had done before and what others were doing. After hearing in *Astral Weeks* something I'd always felt but never heard in music, my faith in it remains unwavering; I can't imagine another album replacing it. Despite putting out some brilliant albums since (*Moondance* would probably be number one on this list if *Astral Weeks* was never recorded), Morrison himself could only match the beauty and soulfulness of *Astral Weeks* in fits and spurts on parts of albums like *Veedon Fleece* and *St. Dominic's Preview*. Morrison's blues have been reduced to comfortable yearning in recent years, but on *Astral Weeks* he wailed at the beauty and sadness of everything he couldn't quite grasp. No album in pop music comes near it.

The Band

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Topping their formidable debut, the Band's self-titled second album is rough, passionate and rousing, the playing is richly textured yet immediate and the material is some of the most solid to ever be assembled on one album. By creating something so grand, the Band might have cursed themselves; their later music couldn't help but pale in comparison. Nonetheless, *The Band* cemented their position as North America's (they're Canadian) truest rock'n'roll band.

The Man and His Music

Sam Cooke

No other soul singer displayed the tender sensitivity of Sam Cooke, and being an early r&b artist, his singing was always economical. But Cooke was also one of soul's greatest songwriters, equally capable of crafting lively chart-toppers or heart-breaking ballads. *The Man and His Music* compiles Cooke's best work, including some of the early gospel stuff.

Exile on Main Street

The Rolling Stones

The end came swiftly for the Rolling Stones. After the stunning series of *Beggars Banquet*, *Let It Bleed*, *Sticky Fingers* and finally *Exile on Main Street*, the Stones released a so-so, confused album in *Goats Head Soup*, then promptly dropped into insignificance. The mind boggles at how a band could go from *Exile on Main Street* to such pandering as *It's Only Rock'n'Roll* in a mere two years. Fortunately, the greatness of *Exile* can almost overwhelm the band's two-decade dry-spell since. Everything

coalesced on *Exile* --country, rock, blues, soul -- into the loose-limbed trademark Stones sound. *Exile* is practically the measure of a rock'n'roll album's greatness, but comparisons inevitably only lead to a greater appreciation of the original.

Rickie Lee Jones

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With her slurred, girlish vocals and a natural ability similar to that of Bruce Springsteen, Randy Newman and Van Morrison, Rickie Lee Jones's debut stood head and shoulders above the competition in 1979. A combination of lively bop and moving Van Morrison-esque balladry, *Rickie Lee Jones* may very well be the single greatest debut album ever released.

Beaster

Sugar

Here's my one major departure from rock crit perennials. Released only last summer, I've already listened to Sugar's second effort, *Beaster*, a mere EP, more than most of the albums on this list. Harsher albums have probably been recorded, but none with such frightening melodic control. Bob Mould splices aggression and melody so often you begin to think one can't exist without the other. One track blurs into the next as Mould piles on some of the most purposeful feedback in the history of rock and uses his tunes like launching pads for the ferociously precise explosions. Better than anything by Husker Du and the most utterly furious album ever made.

Layla and Other

Assorted Love Songs

Derek and the Dominos

Without *Layla*, all the "Clapton is God" graffiti would be comical. Before *Layla*, Clapton was talented and fiery, but had unremarkable songwriting talents; since then he has generally been a tremendous bore, though he has his moments. But even doubters had to be stunned by the grandeur of *Layla*. The album features some of the saddest electric blues ever recorded, right alongside some of the most overwhelmingly inspired jamming ever heard. If he'd done nothing else, *Layla* would justify the Clapton legend.

Shoot Out the Lights

Richard and Linda Thompson

Undoubtedly pop music's most underappreciated masterpiece, *Shoot Out the Lights* is the eloquent swansong of Richard and Linda Thompson. The emotions of a romantic breakup have seldom been conveyed so potently.

Abbey Road

The Beatles

Sgt. Pepper is normally the album that turns up on critics' lists, but the album is actually more of a cultural phenomenon than a musical one. Most

music they recorded before and since has seemed considerably more assured. *Abbey Road* is the culmination of the Beatles' career, covering the raw rock'n'roll ("Oh! Darling," "Come Together"), the grandiose, sweeping stuff ("Carry That Weight," "Something") and the silly pop ditties ("Octopus's Garden" "Maxwell's Silver Hammer"). The Beatles' breakup made perfect sense after this: there was nothing left to be said.

My Aim is True

Elvis Costello

Unlike most artists, Elvis Costello actually seems to have gotten more confused as he's gotten older. It all seemed effortless on *My Aim is True*: his clever songwriting always seemed to come from the heart and despite obvious nods to his mentors, Costello had one of the most original and distinct personalities in rock. The title couldn't be more apt.

Born to Run

Bruce Springsteen

Virtually any Springsteen album can be chosen as his best, but *Born to Run* is the sound that defined Springsteen: Phil Spector-ish immensity, a Dylan-esque lyrical bent, a classic rock feel for songwriting. Hopeful and romantic, *Born to Run* is the embodiment of youth.

Good Old Boys

Randy Newman

Randy Newman is unjustly known for cruel gags like "Short People," but his finest music has always been sweeping and gorgeous. *Good Old Boys* is Newman's most r&b-rooted work, but as always, it's the ballads that take your breath away: "Louisiana 1927," "Guilty," "A Wedding in Cherokee Park." It's a little sketchy at times, but the best material is simply awe-inspiring.

What's Going On

Marvin Gaye

Gaye's most restrained and spiritual outing, the transcendent *What's Going On* rises above its religious subtext with music that feels divine without having to get specific. The album also features some of Gaye's most poignant social commentary.

Document

REM

Before *Document*, REM seemed a charming but limited band whose advances since their classic first album had been fairly minuscule: songs like "Feeling Gravity's Pull" and "Begin the Begin" added an edgy dissonance, while *Life's Rich Pageant* upped the energy level, but the band often seemed repetitive. *Document* is the culmination of REM's first phase, pulled off with rousing spirit and some of their best songs: "Finest Worksong," "The One

I Love," "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)". The band has since moved in a surprisingly intimate, singular direction, but *Document* remains their most assured and inspired work.

The Joshua Tree

U2

As *Document* was for REM, *The Joshua Tree* (released in the same year) is the full realization of U2's first phase. Epic, mourning and moody, the album is flawless. Perhaps the band realized they'd gone as far as they could in that direction and couldn't possibly top it. The emotional fire of *The Joshua Tree* continues to overshadow their more mechanical recent material.

Loaded

The Velvet Underground

VU's *Loaded* might as well be the work of a different band: nothing they had done before -- from the melancholy restraint of *The Velvet Underground* to the electrified chaos of *White Light/White Heat* -- indicated the band was capable of such a triumph of unpretentious rock songwriting. Anything but contrived, Lou Reed's creativity seems to flower in the rock song format, producing some of his most memorable songs in "Sweet Jane," "Rock'n'Roll" and "Head Held High."

London Calling

The Clash

The Clash's *London Calling* isn't really a punk album, or at least at its best it's not. *London Calling* is one of the greatest pop albums ever recorded, played with the inventiveness of a fecund imagination let loose on a whole new world of music.

Paul Simon

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After his overblown final days with Garfunkel, Paul Simon pared things down for his solo debut and came up with his least saccharine work. A mood of foreboding is added to contrast his always brilliant pop songwriting.

Warren Zevon

Warren Zevon

With his first, and still best album, Warren Zevon deployed crazed rock and Randy Newman-ish balladry with equal aplomb. "Desperadoes Under the Eaves" and "Mohammed, Radio" remain his greatest achievements.

The Pretender

Jackson Browne

With only the most meagre performing talents, the strength of Browne's songwriting made him one of the 70's most interesting artists. *The Pretender* is his most ambitious album, a sweeping song cycle, that displays the wide range of his writing.