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Essential Acoustic Albums of 2012

Making a list of the “best” albums of any given year can be a tricky business; just ask the *Acoustic Guitar* editors and contributors who were tasked with coming up with their Top Ten lists of the best acoustic albums released in the past year. The recurring question in the office this year was, “What do you mean I can only choose ten? That’s impossible!” And while heavyweights such as Rodney Crowell, Bob Dylan, Ry Cooder, Justin Townes Earle, and Punch Brothers, as well as talented newcomers Black Prairie, Shovels and Rope, Field Report, and Adam Miller, make multiple appearances, the sheer diversity of artists presented here serves as a potent reminder of acoustic music’s depth. So whether you’re into avant-garde fingerstyle, rollicking old-school country, or adventurous singer-songwriters, you can find it here.

DAN GABEL, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR



Cahalen Morrison and Eli West, *Our Lady of the Tall Trees*

This duo’s second album highlights both members’ tasteful playing, with Cahalen Morrison’s mandolin and clawhammer banjo and Eli West’s acoustic guitar interweaving to support inventive original songs, well-placed covers (Norman Blake’s “Church Street Blues” and Townes Van Zandt’s “Loretta”), and toe-tapping instrumentals. Morrison’s keening voice and West’s more plaintive delivery make for soaring brother-duo harmonies throughout. (cahalenandeli.com)



Black Prairie, *A Tear in the Eye Is a Wound in the Heart*

This is a confident and deep band, composing songs for guitar, accordion, dobro, fiddle, and bass, with nods to the members’ pedigrees in the Decemberists and Bearfoot but that are completely unique. They even pay compelling and heartfelt tribute to two towers of American music here, with the original instrumental “For the Love of John Hartford” and the song “Richard Manuel,” one of several cuts highlighting Annalisa Tornfelt’s beautiful, easy vocals. (Sugar Hill)



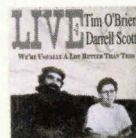
Field Report, *Field Report*

Songwriter Chris Porterfield, formerly of DeYarmond Edison (with Justin Vernon, now of Bon Iver), has built this Milwaukee-based band to deliver haunting versions of his poetic songs with spare fingerpicking on nylon- and steel-string acoustics, sweeping pedal steel and electric guitar lines, and a tight but restrained rhythm section. Somehow, it all adds to the songs’ sense of solitude. (Partisan)



Kelly Joe Phelps, *Brother Sinner and the Whale*

On this gospel-themed album, Phelps gives us a set of originals with lyrics that largely draw on the book of Jonah in the Old Testament and guitar that calls on the book of Phelps—bottleneck slide on a National Style O (“Talkin’ to Jehova,” the instrumental “Spit Me Outta the Whale,” and others) and plenty of fluid fingerpicking. The vocals sound relaxed and smooth, like Phelps is inspired and embracing his latest turn in a fascinating musical journey. (Black Hen)



Darrell Scott and Tim O’Brien, *We’re Usually a Lot Better Than This*

Recorded in 2005 and 2006 at fund-raisers for a school where each had a child in attendance, this set includes live versions of Darrell Scott and Tim O’Brien songs from 2000’s Grammy-nominated *Real Time* and covers that include Gordon Lightfoot’s “Early Morning Rain,” a rousing “Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning,” and others. A spontaneous snapshot of two of the best writers, singers, and pickers of our day enjoying a stage together. (Full Light)



Foghorn Stringband, *Outshine the Sun*

Mandolinist Caleb Klauder and fiddler-extraordinaire Sammy Lind are cofounders of this long-running, authentic old-time band. With Nadine Landry on bass and Reeb Willms on guitar, Foghorn focuses on the tradition with well-chosen songs and tunes that tend toward the more obscure reaches of the old-time repertoire. All four members sing and harmonize beautifully, and while they display their formidable playing chops throughout, they skip manic antics and keep it melodic. (Foghorn Music)



Black Prairie, *A Tear in the Eye Is a Wound in the Heart*

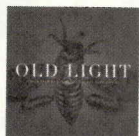
On this superb sophomore set, Black Prairie focuses on violinist Annalisa Tornfelt's sultry vocals instead of the instrumental chops of archtop guitarist Jon Neufeld, resophonic guitarist Chris Funk, accordionist Jenny Conlee, and bassist Nate Query, turning this band from a Decemberists side project into one of the most tuneful, inventive, and enjoyable acoustic bands on the contemporary scene. (Sugar Hill)



Cahalen Morrison and Eli West, *Our Lady of the Tall Trees*

Mandolinist Cahalen Morrison and guitarist Eli West's instruments interact more like a fiddle and banjo would, with melodies and partial chords cascading into

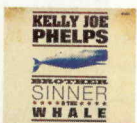
and leaping upon one another, rarely taking strictly solo turns but creating a rich, complex string duet sound to back Morrison's naturalistic, slightly archaic songs. (cahalenandeli.com)



Rayna Gellert, *Old Light: Songs of My Childhood and Other Gone Worlds.*

On *Old Light*, old-time fiddle prodigy Rayna Gellert has reinvented herself as an Americana singer-songwriter and gone straight to the head of the class. Her deep trad roots have shown her how to personalize universal emotions and deliver these original and traditional songs about memory and its traces with an uninflected burnished alto that reveals their emotional truths better than any overt warbling could. Nathan Salsburg's guitars anchor a spare, nuanced production that includes glimpses of trumpet, pedal steel, banjo, and

percussion, but not quite enough of Gellert's wondrous fiddling. (StorySound)



Kelly Joe Phelps, *Brother Sinner and the Whale*

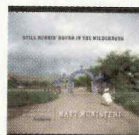
There's nothing quite like the sound of Kelly Joe Phelps's acoustic slide guitar playing, and there are undoubtedly legions who are glad Phelps "saw the light" and returned to the bottleneck (this time on standard guitar instead of lap slide) for this collection of uplifting original spirituals. (Black Hen)



The Shins, *Port of Morrow*

Shins' leader James Mercer is one of pop music's great melodists, in a league with Paul McCartney, Glenn Tillbrook, and Neil Finn, and the Shins' fourth album is one of his best

collections, with enough memorable melodies to fill a greatest-hooks collection for most songwriters. "It's Only Life" is a marvel, building through six separate melodic sections (a verse and five prechoruses?) until it reaches its resplendent refrain. (Columbia)



Matt Munisteri, *Still Runnin' Round in the Wilderness—The Lost Music of Willard Robison, Vol. 1*

Swing-jazz guitarist/vocalist/songwriter Matt Munisteri may have limited the repertoire of his second solo recording to the songs of little-known 1920s folk-jazz singer-songwriter Willard Robison (a musical ancestor, as Munisteri notes, to Randy Newman, Van Dyke Parks, and Mose Allison) but this is far from being a musical re-creation and is only nostalgic in the sense that Munisteri's tribute recalls a time when instrumental virtuosity, harmonic sophistication, bucolic storysongs, and a straightforward emotional delivery were not mutually exclusive. (Old Cow)



Matt Finner Trio, *Winter Harvest*

Mandolinist Matt Finner's trio with Eric Thorin on bass and Ross Martin on acoustic guitar is a contemporary bluegrass version of a great jazz piano trio (think Bill Evans at the Village Vanguard) in which every member contributes to the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic flow. You'll hear echoes of Celtic fiddle music, Philip Glass, jam-band funk, and Bill Frisell's Americana-jazz on *Winter Harvest*, a collection of original instrumentals from the trio's "Music du Jour" gigs, but you won't hear prepackaged licks, superfluous virtuosity, or anything that detracts from the trio's single-minded musical vision. (Compass)



Sara Watkins, *Sun Midnight Sun*

Former Nickel Creek fiddler Sara Watkins had a breakthrough year in 2011, guest-hosting *A Prairie Home Companion*, touring as a member of the Decemberists, and finishing up by recording her sophomore solo album, *Sun Midnight Sun*, with producer Blake Mills. Featuring brother, Sean Watkins, on guitars, with guest vocals from Jackson Browne and Fiona Apple, *Sun Midnight Sun* is a feisty folk-rock tour-de-force showcasing Watkins's passionate vocals and earthy originals, a couple of nods to Willie Nelson and the Everly Brothers, and my personal 2012 Song of the Year: Dan Wilson's "If It Pleases You." (Nonesuch)



Al Petteway, *It's Only the Blues*

It's somewhat odd to hear traditional blues tunes, influenced by Etta Baker, Doc Watson, and Big Bill Broonzy, played with such lush tones and earnest elegance, but fingerstyle guitarist Al Petteway uses these original and traditional blues not only to pay homage to his musical heroes but as a canvas on which to paint his own suave, skillful sensibility. (Fairewood)



Laura Gibson, *La Grande*

Laura Gibson's ethereal and forlorn folksy soprano, nylon-string guitar, and offbeat confessional songs are lovingly enveloped here by what sounds like the house band for a David Lynch-produced TV show based in a seedy tropical lizard lounge populated by Portlandia expatriates, with guest appearances by members of Calexico and the Decemberists. (Barsuk)



Buddy Miller and Jim Lauderdale, *Buddy and Jim*

The first full album from two hugely influential

figures in today's Americana music community combines new songs ("I Lost My Job of Loving You," "That's Not Even Why I Love You," and others) with the duo's takes on country and roots classics, including a rockabilly-infused version of "The Train That Carried My Girl from Town." First the Sirius XM radio show and now this? Here's to a long-running collaboration. (New West)



Trampled by Turtles, *Stars and Satellites*

Yes, these guys can play fast, but on this album they work in more subtle and steady numbers than frenetic ones, and the result is a well-balanced set of originals mostly written by guitarist and vocalist Dave Simonett. The band's performance of the poignant "Alone" on *The Late Show with David Letterman* in 2012 helped bring them to the attention of fans drawn to Mumford and Sons, the Avett Brothers, and other bands (with banjos!) that are hitting the mainstream. (Banjodad)



Kate Rusby, *20*

Celebrating two decades in the business, Kate Rusby has rerecorded some of her favorite tracks with a host of giants of British, Scottish, and Irish folk (Richard Thompson, Nic Jones, Dick Gaughan, Paul Brady) as well as top American musicians (Sarah Jarosz, Chris Thile, Aoife O'Donovan). The guests mostly play supporting roles, leaving the spotlight firmly on Rusby's tender vocals and solid guitar accompaniment. (Pure)



I Draw Slow, *Redhills*

This Dublin-based five-piece, anchored by songwriting siblings Dave and Louise Holden (guitar and vocals, respectively), delivers melodic, original roots music. The fiddle, banjo, and bass bring authentic hints of Appalachia, while the Holdens' hummable melodies and voices have a slight Irish lilt. Selections like "Honeymoon" show off deft fingerpicking and understated instrumental prowess. (Pinecastle)

MARK SMITH, MANAGING EDITOR



Tallest Man on Earth, *There's No Leaving Now*

In Swedish singer-songwriter Kristian

Matsson's songs, nature—rivers, fields, mountains—serve not just as settings but metaphors for the unsettled and impenetrable state of the heart. But there's hope and wistfulness here as well; all of what it means to be human, brilliantly encapsulated in meditative songs that owe a heavy debt to American folk. (Dead Oceans)



Calexico, *Algiers*

The word *cinematic* gets used a lot when describing Calexico's music. Perhaps it's the

dramatic nylon-string guitar that often propels the group's sound, or maybe it's the interplay of Tex-Mex horns and wistful vocals. One thing's for sure—Calexico has amassed an impressive discography over the past 15 years that doesn't include a single dud. *Algiers* carries on that tradition, with the delicate "Fortune Teller" and the tense "Maybe on a Monday" as linchpins in a restlessly adventurous collection. (Anti-)



Shovels and Rope, *O' Be Joyful*

This husband-and-wife duo plays it lo-fi and gritty; acoustic guitars

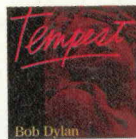
and some harmonica and kick drum thrown in for spice. No frills, no puttin' on airs—just songs about murder and all the other dark forces that make country music great. The star of the show is Cary Ann Hearst's voice, an expressive cross between Loretta Lynn's West Virginia croon and Wanda Jackson's rockabilly snarl. (Dualtone)



Black Prairie, *A Tear in the Eye Is a Wound in the Heart*

From the excellent guitar playing of Chris

Funk and Jon Neufeld to violinist Annalisa Tornfelt's beautiful singing and playing, Black Prairie's sophomore effort never disappoints. The one-two punch of "Rock of Ages" and "For the Love of John Hartford" shows a band with a deep devotion to American roots music and a willingness to buck listeners' expectations. (Sugar Hill)



Bob Dylan, *Tempest*

The voice is now a strangled croak, but then again, it was never really about

the voice. (Well, maybe in a weird way it was.) Fans of Dylan's post-motorcycle-crash output are used to his creative ups-and-downs; a solid album or two appearing out of nowhere amidst lukewarm afterthoughts and outright turkeys. Thankfully, *Tempest* is in the former category. (Columbia)



Tift Merritt, *Travelling Alone*

For her sixth album, Merritt assembled a crack backing

band including the incomparable Marc Ribot, whose ethereal tones hover around these well-crafted songs, always supporting the singer-songwriter's golden voice. (Yep Roc)



Field Report, *Field Report*

When Chris Porterfield's previous band with Bon Iver's

Justin Vernon (DeYarmond Edison) split, he assumed that he was done with music. Turns out he was wrong—and if this gem of a record didn't completely erase his doubts, then nothing will. (Partisan)



Old Crow Medicine Show, *Carry Me Back*

High-octane and bawdy, *Carry Me Back*

finds Old Crow Medicine Show in fine form, with founding member Critter Fuqua back in full force. From the rowdy "Mississippi Saturday Night" to the lovely "Ain't It Enough," this collection is the string band's most consistent album yet. (ATO)

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TEJA GERKEN, SENIOR EDITOR



Andrew York, *Yamour*

Merely calling Andrew York a guitarist doesn't do justice to the depth of his creative output.

Although he's long been recognized for his compositions, *Yamour* establishes him as one of the leading composers for solo guitar. That York is a virtuosic player (demonstrated here by his stunning version of Bach's "Prelude in C Minor") is icing on the cake. (Majian)



Brooke Miller, *Familiar*

Brooke Miller's voice is both angelic and powerful, and her guitar playing—mostly in alternate tunings—provides effective

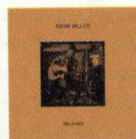
and engaging accompaniment. On the sparsely produced *Familiar*, the focus stays on her voice and guitar for a solid album of folk/pop originals. (Stockfish)



Eric Skye, *A Different Kind of Blue*

Covering an album as iconic as Miles Davis's 1959 masterpiece *Kind of Blue* is an ambitious prop-

osition, on any instrument. Eric Skye demonstrates a thorough understanding of the album's five tunes, and in distilling the material into solo guitar arrangements using his Santa Cruz 00 flattop, he gives these familiar pieces a refreshing character that will appeal to jazz fans as well as guitar aficionados. (Half-Diminished)

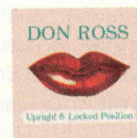


Adam Miller, *Delayed*

Imagine fusing the styles of Tommy Emmanuel, Charlie Hunter, and Tuck Andress for a set of tunes played on solo flattop

steel-string guitar, and you have Adam Miller's *Delayed*. The Australian's record is chock full of original tunes that groove hard and employ impres-

sive polyphonic techniques without being gimmicky. (adammillerc.com)



Don Ross, *Upright and Locked Position*

Upright and Locked Position continues the groove-heavy sound that has influenced a generation

of fingerstylists. While Don Ross's trademark groove, disarming precision, and gorgeous tone are in full effect, the album is also full of great melodies, including "Stop Driving, Start Playing" and "Silver-smith." (Candyrat)



Kevin Kastning and Sándor Szabó, *The Book of Crossings*

Kevin Kastning and Sándor Szabó form one of the most

adventurous guitar duos on the scene. Playing extended-range instruments that include 14-string



Mairi Morrison and Alasdair Roberts, *Urstan*

You don't have to be Scottish to appreciate the beauty of these traditional songs, many sung in Gaelic. Understated acoustic guitar, piano, violin, and percussion frame these lovely interpretations, which range from the playful "Hion Dail-a Horo Hi" to the elegiac "Leanabh an Òir." (Drag City)



Justin Townes Earle, *Nothing's Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now*

Heavy on the R&B horns and sorrow, Justin Townes Earle's fourth full-length album finds him musing on his failings, casting himself as the lovelorn and confused star of the show. While it's not as immediately accessible as *Harlem River Blues* or *Midnight at the Movies*—the horns carry more of the melody than his vocals—*Nothing's Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now* continues a solid run by the young songwriter. (Bloodshot)



Eric Bibb, *Deeper in the Well*

Going to Louisiana brought out the best in Eric Bibb: the uplift in his songwriting, the resonance of his voice, and the versatile elegance of his approach to banjo and guitars. Recorded at Dirk Powell's Cypress House Studio, *Deeper in the Well* perfectly captures the warmth of every instrument, and there's plenty of Cajun/Creole flavor provided by Powell on banjo, fiddle, mandolin, accordion, and bass; Cedric Watson on fiddle; and Christine Balfa on triangle. (Stony Plain)



Carolina Chocolate Drops, *Leaving Eden*

The Carolina Chocolate Drops went through a lot of changes since *Genuine Negro Jig* and have emerged stronger than ever. On *Leaving Eden*, they reach further into the tradition, bringing back tunes from the Georgia Sea Islands ("Read 'em John") and mining Civil War minstrelsy ("Camptown Hornpipe") and the old-time repertoire ("Run Mountain"). Multi-

instrumentalist Hubby Jenkins provides the depth that's been missing from the band, freeing Dom Flemons and Rhiannon Giddens to turn in their most adventuresome performances to date. (Nonesuch)



Justin Townes Earle, *Nothing's Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now*

Newly sober, Justin Townes Earle emerged from years of hard living with the leap he'd been trying to make all along. *Nothing's Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now* is a dark, shadowy, unsparing album that builds on his love of soul music to directly face his demons, and though the album has its upbeat moments, the great majority of these songs are about loss, written by a grown-up Earle who's worn, weary, and ultimately wiser. (Bloodshot)



Foggy Mountain Special: A Bluegrass Tribute to Earl Scruggs

Featuring a dozen of the world's best bluegrass banjoists and a handful of the

genre's hottest flatpickers, these 12 instrumentals are never less than stunning. Guitarists Clay Hess and Cody Kilby demonstrate just how far flatpicking can go while hewing to the tradition; Wyatt Rice's playing on "Steel Guitar Rag" is harmonically rich and rhythmically complex; and dobroist Randy Kohrs unleashes one incredible solo after another, a fitting homage to the bluegrass banjo pioneer. (Rounder)



Glen Hansard, *Rhythm and Repose*

Rhythm and Repose doesn't have a rock band, and it doesn't need one. It's got Glen Hansard front and center, leading a tiny trio of downtown players who help him slow the beat and explore the full range of his tattered baritone. Held together by the lightest touch of piano and guitar, the production keeps the focus exactly where it should be, stripping these melodies to their essential beauty, delivered with a knowing, wounded intimacy. (Anti-)

Berkowitz, cont'd on page 62

contraguitars, 16-string guitars, 12-string and classical baritones, and more, the duo's unclassifiable repertoire borrows from modern classical, experimental jazz, new age, and Eastern European folk traditions. The duo's joyous interplay creates sounds that frequently fall far outside the guitar's usual sonic spectrum. (Greydisc)



Pacific Guitar Ensemble, *Begin*

An eight-piece group that includes classical virtuosos Jon Mendle, David Tanenbaum, and Marc Teicholz and steel-string fingerstylist Peppino D'Agostino, the Pacific Guitar Ensemble creates an orchestral sound on a repertoire that includes Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 and compositions by Sérgio Assad and D'Agostino. Oud, baroque guitar, and bass augment the ensemble's standard guitars, resulting in an appealing cross-over vibe. (GSP)



Chris Proctor, *Close and Personal Friends*

A collection of nine medleys of cover tunes, Chris Proctor's *Close and Personal Friends* features solo

fingerstyle guitar arrangements of tunes as diverse as "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," "Good Day Sunshine," "Sweet Home Alabama," the Scottish "A Scarce O'Tattis/Lyndhurst Jig," and Dave Evans's classic fingerstyle piece "Sad Pig Dance." Proctor plays with authority using mostly straight-ahead fingerstyle techniques and occasional effects such as tapping and an eBow. (Sugarhouse)



Claus Boesser-Ferrari, *Solo Acoustic Guitar Live*

Experimenting with extensive percussive techniques, effects, and a great deal of improvisation on this live recording, Claus Boesser-Ferrari creates a soundscape unlike that of most solo guitarists.

Covers of the Doors' "Light My Fire" and Mongo Santamaría's "Afro Blue" highlight a great collection of otherwise mostly original material. (Acoustic Music)



Al Petteway, *It's Only the Blues*

Originally recorded as examples for his students, Al Petteway's *It's Only the Blues* stands on its own as a great fingerstyle blues album. Recorded mostly in D A D G A D tuning, the songs often merge the blues and Celtic music, a tricky feat. (Fairewood)

Berkowitz, from page 61



Various artists, *Kin: Songs by Rodney Crowell and Mary Karr*

Some of these songs are funny and some are sad, but the best are somewhere in between, crowded with small-town characters feeling big-time emotions, and stuffed with bursting with lines like, "I heard a siren and you came to mind." It's a great experiment in tough-minded, literate country art, delicately walking the tightrope between love and desperation. (Vanguard)



Laurie Lewis, *Skippin' and Flyin'*

Celebrating the centennial of Bill Monroe's birth, Lewis made a series of unconventional choices, playing only one Monroe composition ("Blue Moon of Kentucky") while honoring his legacy as an innovator. The instrumentation is classic (guitar, mandolin, banjo, bass, and fiddle), but the feel is pure California, with relaxed, empathetic ensemble performances and warm, open harmonies. (Spruce and Maple)



Mumford and Sons, *Babel*

On their sophomore *Babel*, Mumford and Sons closely follow the lessons of 2010's *Sigh No More*, combining throat-tearing lead vocals with sweet four-part harmonies, delicate piano passages with full-volume anthemic rock, and dark, discomfiting verses with loving, reassuring choruses. It's a careful, controlled growth that retains their epic power while expanding their sonic palette, refocusing their sound around the simple, hard-driving clarity of Marcus Mumford's guitar. (Glassnote)



Punch Brothers, *Who's Feeling Young Now?*

In its latest evolution, Punch Brothers has become a real band, with all five members playing significant roles in writing and performing this collection of four-minute songs that bridge the gap between pop, rock, jazz, classical, and string band music. *Who's Feeling Young Now?* is an artfully multitracked album that's beautifully melodic, harmonically complex, instantly memorable, and emotionally direct. (Nonesuch)



Shovels and Rope, *O' Be Joyful*

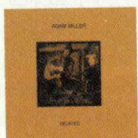
Charleston, South Carolina's Shovels and Rope are as raw as country gets, with Cary Ann Hearst's rusty twang and gutbucket acoustic guitar banging against Michael Trent's overdriven electric, mixing in a little blues, a little gospel, and a lot of grit. (Dualtone)

CÉLINE KEATING, CONTRIBUTOR



Ry Cooder, *Election Special*

In this highly charged political record—released in a tense election year—iconoclastic guitar great Ry Cooder sends out zingers in satirical songs both furious and funny. But his heartfelt lyrics, growling vocals, and signature slide make this an album that is built to last, even after the polls close. (Nonesuch)



Adam Miller, *Delayed*

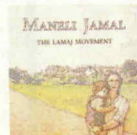
Fingerstyle you can dance to? Australian fingerstyle champion Adam Miller's music is groove-driven yet complex, melding funk, blues, and jazz in a collection of original compositions that are both refined and unbridled. (adammilller.com)



Hardin Burns, *Lounge*

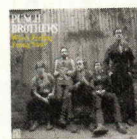
This first release from the pairing of bluesy folk-rock vocalist Jeannie Burns (the Burns Sisters) and country/blues/just-about-

anything guitarist Andrew Hardin yields an addictive set of earthy, hook-filled melodies, stunning harmonies, and graceful virtuosity on acoustic and electric guitars (with Fats Kaplin on fiddle). (Ithaca)



Maneli Jamal, *The Lamaj Movement*

Maneli Jamal is an award-winning string wizard of great subtlety. His latest recording is an instrumental concept album that tells the story of his family's personal diaspora from Iran. Compositions spool through endless variations that reflect jazz, roots, flamenco, and Persian influences. (Candyrat)



Punch Brothers, *Who's Feeling Young Now?*

The string band begun by restlessly creative mandolinist and singer Chris Thile with a slew of whiz-kid virtuosos has evolved in new directions, transforming bluegrass into a fusion of experimental pop, rock, and jazz. (Nonesuch)

DAVID McCARTY, CONTRIBUTOR



The Gonzalo Bergara Quartet, *Walking Home*

Gonzalo Bergara has melded Gypsy jazz, Latin, classical, and other styles into a unique and beautiful fusion all his own. From the moody, dream-sequenced "Nightmare No. 1" and "Nightmare No. 2" to the uptown swing of "Muñequita" to the pounding le pompe/bebop fusion of "Leopold" to the gentle Latin pulse of the title track, Bergara and friends prove that Paris swing, hard jazz, neoclassical, and Buenos Aires rhythms can all walk the same road home. (gonzalobergara.com)



Lyle Lovett, *Release Me*

Covering a broad range of writers and styles, *Release Me* shows Texas's master musical craftsman Lyle Lovett in rare form. From Jesse Winchester's "Isn't That So" re-imagined as a blues-gospel beatdown to his wondrous remake

of "Baby, It's Cold Outside" with Kat Edmonson, *Release Me* reverberates with wit, style, and wry insight into diverse American musical styles. (Curb)



Punch Brothers, *Who's Feeling Young Now?*

The music crafted by MacArthur Fellowship-winning mandolinist Chris Thile and his cohorts on their newest album sounds like acoustic frequencies emanating from the Higgs boson particle. Modern without feeling forced, powerful and rangy like an outside linebacker, tunes like "This Girl" and "Clara" forge indelible musical impressions that could come from no other source. (Nonesuch)



Various artists, *Kin: Songs by Rodney Crowell and Mary Karr*

After calling her out in his song "Earthbound" as one of the reasons

to keep on living, Rodney Crowell collaborated with noted memoirist Mary Karr on a handful of tunes that resonate with shared experience (they both grew up in East Texas within 100 miles of each other), loss, love and pain. With vocals by Rosanne Cash, Vince Gill, Emmylou Harris, Norah Jones, and more, these co-written tunes form a masterful collection of words and music. (Vanguard)



Whit Smith and Matt Munisteri, *Hell Among the Hedgehogs*

With two vintage American archtops fitted with vintage pickups and played through smoky gold tube amps, Whit Smith and Matt Munisteri barrel through a collection of traditional and original tunes on *Hell Among the Hedgehogs*. Smith's title tune could easily find its way to the fingers of jammers at Samois-sur-Seine's Festival Django Reinhardt, while "Along the Navajo Trail" and "Okey Dokey" take the duo from Western swing and



The Giving Tree Band, *Vacilador*

Green lifestyle, bluegrass instrumentation, and artful, orchestral arrangements and vocal harmonies contribute to this band's unique sound. The guitar on "Brown-Eyed Women" is a thing of beauty. (Crooked Creek)



Ewan Dobson, III

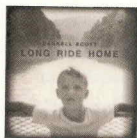
On his third release, Canadian fingerstyle champion Ewan Dobson, an inventive experimenter, makes heavy metal and classical music seem not only compatible but inevitable. (Candyrat)



Rani Arbo and Daisy Mayhem, *Some Bright Morning*

Add Rani Arbo's fiddle and luscious alto voice to her band's harmonies and sophisticated playing in a range of swinging roots styles—here with an "agnostic-

gospel" theme—and what you get is hands down the band's best album yet. (Signature Sounds)



Darrell Scott, *Long Ride Home*

Darrell Scott's gorgeous voice, arresting songwriting, and soulful guitar playing are as good as country music gets. Perhaps because it's shot through with the pain of his father's recent death, this album has even more depth than Scott's usual always-haunting music. (Full Light)



Eric Bibb, *Deeper in the Well*

Veteran bluesman Eric Bibb is at his best on this collection of down-home Mississippi Delta and country blues with a supergroup of backing musicians from blues, Southern old-time, and Louisiana Creole/Cajun styles, including dobro master Jerry Douglas, fiddler Cedric Watson, and Dirk Powell on banjo, mandolin, and fiddle. (Stony Plain)

cowboy dives to the jazz halls of old New Orleans. (Old Cow)



The Time Jumpers, *The Time Jumpers*

Filled with Nashville superpickers and singers like Vince Gill, Ranger Doug Green, Paul Franklin, Andy Reiss, and Dawn and Kenny Sears, the Time Jumpers are on a single-minded mission to put old-school country back on Music City's radar. The band rolls through Western swing, ballads, tearjerkers, flashy instrumentals, and more with a tightness and authenticity not heard in decades. (Rounder)



Matt Flinger Trio, *Winter Harvest*

Arguably the tightest acoustic trio working today, the Matt Flinger Trio breaks new ground in the complex and exhilarating interplay between mandolin, acoustic guitar, and bass as lead instruments. Guitarist Ross Martin brings a profound sense of musicality and invention to the band, both in his singular style of flatpicking and in rhythmically dense, engaging compositions such as "Arco" and "The Stumbling Bro." (Compass)



Infamous Stringdusters, *Silver Sky*

Building on the skybreaking sound this inventive progressive bluegrass band achieved in 2010's *Things That Fly*, *Silver Sky* soars

higher in pursuit of new musical vistas. Uptempo tunes like "The Hitchhiker" and "When the Night Comes Around" will satisfy more traditional fans, while more avant-garde pieces like "Fire" and the gorgeous "Heady Festy" show where this branch of the bluegrass tree is growing into the uncharted sky above. (High Country)



Stephane Wrembel, *Origins*

To follow up on the success of "Bistro Fado," the catchy Gypsy jazz waltz he wrote for Woody Allen's Oscar-winning film *Midnight in Paris*, guitarist Stephane Wrembel has created a moody, mystical album infused with musical styles from around the world. "The Edge" shows off his amazing guitar chops on a smokin' Gypsy bebop tune, while "The Voice from the Desert" and "Water Is Life" create broad, cinematic soundscapes. (Water Is Life)

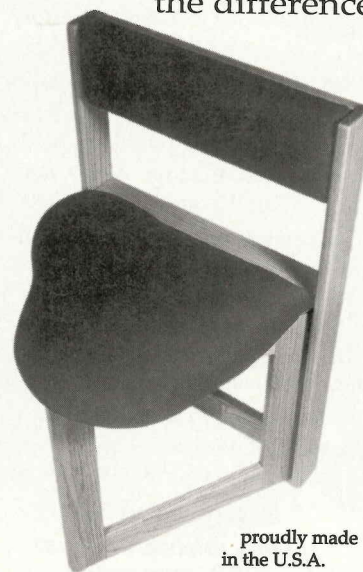


Julie Lee and the Baby Daddies, *Julie Lee and the Baby Daddies*

When you're a struggling but talented singer-songwriter in Nashville baby-sitting the children of guitar ace Kenny Vaughan and bassist Mike Bub, what do you do? Well, if you're Julie Lee, you enlist their musical

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Essential Acoustic Albums of 2012

DERK RICHARDSON, CONTRIBUTOR



Various artists, *Kin: Songs by Mary Karr and Rodney Crowell*

Drawing on their shared background in Houston's swampy, working-class, "ringworm belt," veteran country star Rodney Crowell and poet-memoirist-and-first-time-songwriter Mary Karr came up with instant classics for Crowell, Norah Jones, Kris Kristofferson, Lucinda Williams, Emmylou Harris, and others to sing. (Vanguard)



Lambchop, *Mr. M*

As the quirky Nashville chamber-country band gets progressively quieter, its albums actually grow more sonically complex, and Kurt Wagner's rumbling muffer of a baritone more intimately conveys his skewed, oblique perspective on life, love, and loss. (Merge)



Tin Hat, *The Rain Is a Handsome Animal: 17 Songs from the Poetry of E.E. Cummings*

Founding acoustic guitarist Mark Orton and violinist Carla Kihlstedt are not Tin Hat's only constants over the past 15 years; with clarinetist Ben Goldberg and accordionist/pianist Rob Reich completing the quartet (and with Kihlstedt adding viola and voice, and Orton playing some dobro and piano), the group consistently obliterates genre barriers—sometimes in a whisper, sometimes in a raucous shout. Here, their bristly interplay serves a 17-movement song cycle based on Cummings's modernistic sonnets. (New Amsterdam)



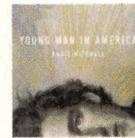
Jim McAuley, *Gongfarmer 36*

Although he'll remind some listeners of John Fahey, the criminally underrecorded McAuley (his only other recordings are *Vignes* by the Acoustic Guitar Trio with Nels Cline and Rod Poole, and *Gongfarmer 18*) folds the influences of Piedmont blues, jazz, classical, microtonalism, Mickey Baker, John McLaughlin, and more into his absorbing, abstract acoustic improvisations. (Long Song)



Caetano Veloso and David Byrne, *Live at Carnegie Hall*

Recorded when they shared the stage in 2004, these 18 signature songs from Caetano Veloso's and David Byrne's deep catalogs capture the radical tropicalia pioneer and the new wave art-rockster totally stripped down to acoustic guitars, cello, percussion, and provocative, occasionally confrontational lyrics. "Road to Nowhere"? Hardly. "Heaven"? Definitely. (Nonesuch)



Anaïs Mitchell, *Young Man in America*

Anaïs Mitchell's dark, doomy narratives, sung in a squeak that squeezes nuance from the words, ride the musical swells created by producer/bassist Todd Sickafoose and an astounding folk-jazz cast that includes guitarist Adam Levy, clarinetist Ben Goldberg, violinist Jenny Scheinman, mandolinist Chris Thile, and others. (Wilderland)



The Mountain Goats, *Transcendental Youth*

You might not see your life in those of the marginal characters and troubled stories John Darnielle creates and inhabits on his band's 14th studio album, and you might never warm up to Darnielle's pinched vocal bleat. But the Mountain Goats' once-lo-fi indie sound is now clean, rich, acoustic-guitar-driven folk-rock (with splashes of symphonic horns and subtle electronics) that tugs you into the songs and holds you until you it all comes clear. (Merge)



Beth Orton, *Sugaring Season*

For her first album in six years, British singer-songwriter Beth Orton worked with producer Tucker Martine, guitarist Marc Ribot, keyboardist Rob Burger, violist Eyvind Kang, drummer Brian Blade, arranger Nico Muhly, and others to fashion a deep chamber-folk-rock sound that breaks from her trip-hop past and puts her Dusty Springfield-meets-Joni Mitchell voice in its most musically complex context to date. (Anti-)



Loudon Wainwright III, *Older Than My Old Man Now*

At 66, the once-anointed "new Bob Dylan" contemplates aging and everything that goes along with it, including family turmoil, meds, and death. Wainwright is joined by kids (Rufus and Martha Wainwright, Lucy Wainwright Roche), an ex-wife (Suzzy Roche), guitarists and singers (John Scofield, Matt Munisteri, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Chris Smither), and others, but the focus is always "my favorite protagonist—me." (2nd Story Sound)



Tift Merritt, *Traveling Alone*

By integrating herself as a guitar-strumming equal into an all-star band that includes guitarist Marc Ribot and Calexico drummer John Convertino, singer-songwriter Merritt finds her most comfortable musical stride to date. Fans of Emmylou Harris and Lucinda Williams should join Merritt as she sings her way through life on her fifth and best album. (Yep Roc)

MIKE THOMAS, CONTRIBUTOR



Lucy Kaplansky, *Reunion*

A deeply moving collection built around a core of

songs dedicated to family and close friends, Lucy Kaplansky's seventh album ranks with her finest work. And the opening track, the gritty "Scavenger," stands out as perhaps the singer-songwriter's single most fully realized folk-rock gem to date. (Red House)



Dar Williams, *In the Time of Gods*

An ambitious project that

weighs a host of current personal and political issues against the parables of Greek mythology, this gorgeous and powerful ten-song set hits the bull's-eye on every aesthetic level. Beautifully played, sung, and written, the album reaffirms Dar Williams's place in the upper echelon of contemporary troubadours. (Razor and Tie)



Justin Townes Earle, *Nothing's Gonna Change the Way You Feel About Me Now*

If abundant talent and an occasionally self-destructive rebellious streak run in this guy's blood, it's fortunate for all concerned that, like his famous father, Justin Townes Earle knows how to turn that incendiary combination into memorable music. Soulful and simmering with wee-hours regret and self-knowledge learned the hard way, tracks such as the title song and "Look the Other Way" pack a subtle, Memphis-style R&B punch. (Bloodshot)



Dwight Yoakam, *3 Pears*

There's always been a citified edge to Dwight

Yoakam's neo-Bakersfield honky-tonk stylings, but the onetime country chart-topper's melodic crunch instincts take front and center this time around. By no means does Yoakam abandon his rural origins,

but songs such as the title track, "Take Hold of My Hand," and "Nothing but Love" stake out the rock side of roots-rock with wit and wallop. (Warner Bros.)



Kasey Chambers, *Storybook*

One of the most compelling voices on the

alternative-country landscape, Australian singer-songwriter Kasey Chambers delivers a set of covers that pays tribute to many of the artists who've influenced her along the way. Incandescent versions of Gillian Welch's "Orphan Girl," Gram Parsons's "Return of the Grievous Angel," and Suzanne Vega's "Luka," to name a few notable tracks, should in turn inspire a new generation of hopefuls. (Sugar Hill)



Ry Cooder, *Election Special*

Roots icon Ry Cooder's recent career transition

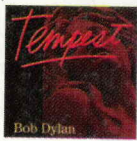
to political commentator/protest singer that began with 2011's *Pull Up Some Dust and Sit Down* shifted into high gear as the presidential election loomed. If you square up eye-to-eye with the views expressed in giant-slayer tracks such as "Mutt Romney Blues" and "The Wall Street Part of Town," the album's a fist-pumping hoot; if you also savor Cooder's return to the raw-boned country blues feel of his earliest records, this bad boy's a grand slam. (Nonesuch)



Alejandro Escovedo, *Big Station*

In a crowded and often

derivative Americana field, no one does it quite like Alejandro Escovedo. The Austin, Texas, singer/guitarist's signature brand of serrated, glam-tinged roots-rock is on full display here, from the snarl of the title track to the melodic rush of "Bottom of the World" and the soulful sway of "San Antonio Rain." (Fantasy)



Bob Dylan, *Tempest*

Just when you consider that the old master may

have gone to the well a time too many with his late-career recipe of cascading verbiage (albeit brilliant) rasped over a bed of simple, repetitive ensemble arrangements, Bob Dylan reels off a gripping, nearly 14-minute ballad about the *Titanic* disaster (the title track) and a moving, atypically specific (for Dylan) tribute to his fallen comrade John Lennon ("Roll On John"). And although we've heard a lot from Dylan's grizzled bluesman persona in recent years, stuff like "Narrow Way" is just plain nasty. Good nasty. (Columbia)



The Lumineers, *The Lumineers*

The buoyant spirit and infectious bounce

that animate folk-pop sparklers such as "Flowers in Your Hair," "Dead Sea," "Stubborn Love," and a healthy handful of others get under your skin at first listen and linger for a good, long while. This youthful Denver-based trio sounds like they're having a great time, and it's nearly impossible to resist hopping along for the ride. (Dualtone)



Mark Knopfler, *Privateering*

Coming from one of the most undervalued rock

noblemen of his era, 20 fresh and varied tracks—from Celtic to country to blues to folk—spread out over two discs rate as quite a treasure indeed. Mark Knopfler's lived-in voice, fluid touch on both acoustic and electric guitar, and thoughtful songcraft continue to stand apart. (Universal)

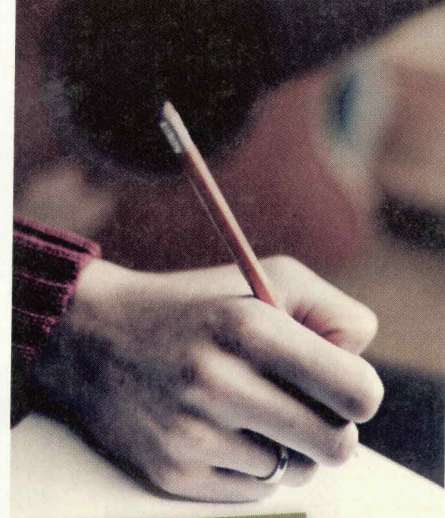
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