

Top Shelf

The best CDs of 2005

Pretend you're reading my online blog, where I tell you my mood, what I just ate for dinner, how cool my husband is, my thoughts on Condoleeza Rice's insane justifications of torture, the December *New Yorker's* excellent 12-page article about intelligent design and what I'm listening to. Except skip all that other crap and read right ahead to what I'm listening to.

Early Man, *Closing In*

Released: 2005, Matador Records
Genre: Metal
earlymanarmy.com

The metal gods are powerful these days. On their side is Early Man, two ass-kickin' rockers from Ohio now based in NYC. You will be head-



banging and flashing the devil horns by the end of their first song, guaranteed. Reminds me of Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, early Metallica – the bands many metalheads cut their teeth on – and singer Mike Conte has perfected the Ozzy vocal delivery. Critics might argue that their music is derivative, but who cares? You'd have to listen to 100 hours of metal to get as much rock as they put into these 11 songs. If any metalhead out there doesn't go ape-shit over at least one of these songs, they should be unceremoniously stripped of all their black T-shirts.

Gang of Four, *Return The Gift*

Released: 2005, V2 Records
Genre: Dance punk
gangoffour.us

Many of today's popular "dance punk" artists owe a huge debt to Gang of Four: Franz Ferdinand, !!!, Futureheads, Bloc Party, the list goes on. Gang of Four was out there doin' it for themselves 25 years ago, pointing at a smoking gun at poverty, class issues, consumerism, sex and love without missing a

beat on the dance floor.

Even casual fans of Leeds' Gang of Four probably already have seven of these songs on their music shelf. Half the tracks on *Return The Gift* are from GoF's still-potent 1979 CD *Entertainment!*

If you already have these songs, don't buy this just because Hugo Bernham didn't like the original drum tracks, but if you haven't been introduced to GoF, this is an invigorating place to start.

Low, *The Great Destroyer*

Released: 2005, Sub Pop
Genre: Indie rock

Dave Fridmann, who also produced Sleater-Kinney's new CD, likes to add fuzz and distortion in unexpected places. The beauty of Low is their sparse natural harmonies that easily get smothered – too much fuzz adds a layer of dirt I want to wash away. That said, I love this album. On the opening track, "Monkey," Alan Sparhawk sings in an almost ritualistic intonation, "Tonight the monkey dies." Low has had a monkey on their back for years – the expectation that they must remain sleepy slow-core minimalists. This CD (hopefully) drives the final nail in that idea.

"Silver Rider" adds to Low's collection of "la la la" songs. "Step" is another great hand-clapping song, which Low also does so well. "When I Go Deaf" reverberates with guitar noise. As sunny as its name sounds, "California" is pure pop. Sparhawk sings "Death of a Salesman" completely solo over quietly strumming guitar, then shifts gears for the final track, "Walk Into the Sea," which is a short-but-intense kiss off. Low's signature style is on display throughout this album, it's just amped up to a walking pace rather than a crawl. The old Low is dead. Long live the new Low.

Sleater-Kinney, *The Woods*

Released: 2005, Sub Pop
Genre: Rock

Sleater-Kinney chose Dave Fridmann to produce their seventh album, *The Woods*. The noted Flaming Lips and Low producer was vocal about not being a fan of their music, so hiring him guaranteed a challenge. There's tension in *The Woods*, making it their most inaccessible album yet. Fridmann's finished product is so fuzzy and distorted at times that you feel your head is in ether.

The opener, "The Fox," is like an Aesop's fable sung in such a blood-curdling way it makes your hair stand on end. One development is the guitar solo; on "What's Mine Is Yours" guitarist (and singer) Carrie Brownstein channels Hendrix for a full minute before the song sprints to a finish. Brownstein, singer/guitarist Corin Tucker and drummer Janet Weiss lunge for your throat so many times you wonder if you'll survive for a repeat listen.

When you do, you'll hear more depth and complexity than the threesome has ever shown



before. Throughout, traditional song structure is disposed of and passion rules. One of the album's more straight-ahead rockers is "Jumpers," a catchy tune with an unsettling topic: committing suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge. While some of the production techniques leave me cold, this is a fantastic album.

Jesu

Released: 2004, Hydra Head
Genre: Industrial drone

This has been out for a while, so most people into Justin Broadrick's post-Godflesh work probably already know about Jesu, but plenty of people have never heard of Broadrick or his musical legacy. Broadrick joined Napalm Death as a teenager in 1983 and formed Godflesh in 1988. Just about every industrial band owes homage to Broadrick's distortion, samples and drum machines.

Unlike Jesu's first release, Justin wrote the songs but doesn't play all the instruments here. That distinctive Broadrick sound is still quite apparent; it's just sweetened, like Godflesh's broken shell filled with a quiet despair rather than brutal nihilism. "Walk on Water" is an 11-minute dirge, "Sun Day" is a 10-minute ambient exploration, and the whole CD lasts for 75 minutes. It's refreshing to enter Justin's brain with its windows thrown open and some light coming in, even if it is from a pale, chilly, wintry sun.

Nouvelle Vague

Released: 2005, Luaka Bop
Genre: French lounge covers

You don't have to like or even recognize the classic new wave singles covered by French producers Marc Collin and Olivier Libaux to enjoy this collection. If breathy French pop and bossa nova sound like two great tastes that taste great together, check out this CD. The pair has chosen some stellar songs to remake, from the familiar

to the uncelebrated. They take on Joy Division's "Love Will Tear Us Apart" and XTC's "Making Plans for Nigel." The Dead Kennedys' "Too Drunk to Fuck" is fantastically funny while The Cure's "A Forest" is reborn as a Denny-esque exotica tune. And Tuxedomoon? Who the hell remembers them? "In a Manner of Speaking" could be Jobim and Astrid Gilberto. The musicians selected several pneumatic, beautiful French women who didn't know the original songs to sing these tunes, so there's a note of naivete in each. Toss in Killing Joke, The Specials, Depeche Mode, Sisters of Mercy, PiL and Josef K., and you've got yourself one heckuva conversation piece

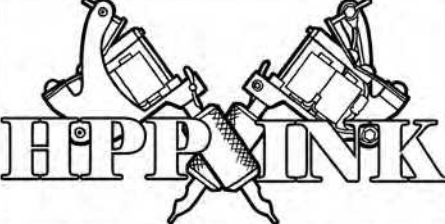
for your next cocktail party.

Misfits Meet The Nutley Brass, *Fiend Club Lounge*

Released: 2005, Misfits Records, Ryko
Genre: Lounge

Yes, another cover album. I love them! I also love The Misfits. I know, I know, those horrific lyrics turn many off, but relax, this CD is *sans* words. I can't describe the belly laugh I got when I heard the opening strains of "Last Caress" played by a for-real classic brass band. Bandleader and arranger Sam Elwitt doesn't just transcribe the band's music, he adds in Glenn Danzig's crooning vocal phrasing, which enhances the melodic nature of all The Misfits' songs. Elwitt has taken 11 Misfits classics, including "Astro Zombies," "Die Die My Darling," "Teenagers From Mars," "Attitude" and, God love him, "Hybrid Moments." It's not meant to replace your Misfits listening, but will certainly enhance your musical appreciation of Danzig and crew. Get yer hands on another of the Nutley Brass releases, *Ramones Songbook*.





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