

new year's top 5 by william kennedy

**Year of Hibernation** Youth Lagoon

Youth Lagoon's gem of a debut, *Year of Hibernation*, is an atmospheric textural collection of sweetly sad songs from Boise, Idaho's Trevor Powers. The album consists mainly of voice, keyboards, drum machine and guitar, with Powers sing/shouting in a diminutive and strangled yelp over something less than "lo-fi" production — more like a dispatch from some alien teenager's bedroom. Underneath it all are strong, tuneful and compelling indie-pop songs with heart, proving Powers isn't afraid to hook you with sweet melodies and infectious rhythms. The track "Afternoons" will have you enraptured on first listen.

Let England Shake PJ Harvey

A high point in PJ Harvey's amazingly consistent career is this year's *Let England Shake*. This is the sound of Harvey processing the decade of war her native U.K. has shared with America, and the result is a rich, rewarding album that reveals Harvey finding balance among all her personalities — the banshee, the folksinger, the chanteuse and the punk rocker. Rarely have we heard Harvey so focused and so nuanced. Tracks of note are "The Last Living Rose" and "Words that Maketh Murder." With *Let England Shake*, Harvey redefines the protest album for modern warfare and writes a love letter to merry old England — in all its musty and faded glory.

**Go with Me** Seapony

Seapony's *Go With Me* is a dreamy fuzzed-out nugget — a sugary pop confection. The Seattle-based trio writes simple and tuneful guitar-based songs that rarely clock at more than three minutes or feature more than three chords. Jen Weidt's breathy vocals float over Danny Rowland's jingly-jangly guitar hooks, all propelled along not by a real drummer but the steady bip-bop of a drum machine. There are girl-group sounds in the mix and the melodrama of The Smiths shows up now and then, while the cooler-than-you attitude of the Velvet Underground mingles with the arty power pop of Beat Happening and Young Marble Giants. What is not present is any grand statement about society or modern life. But when music is this clean and refreshingly simple, a catchy tune is all you need.

Self-Titled Wild Flag

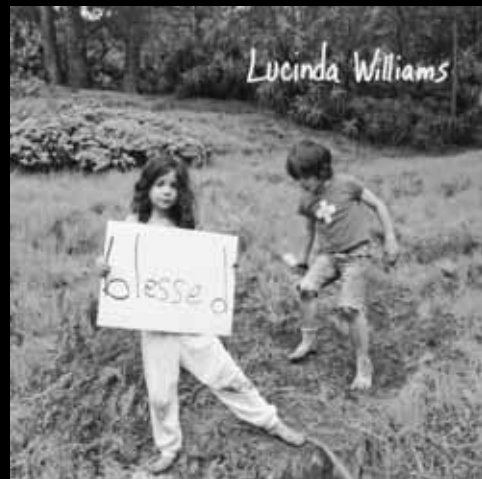
Wild Flag is a super group featuring Carrie Brownstein of Sleater-Kinney as well as members of the Jicks, Helium and the Minders. The result is less a super group of aging riot grrrls riding past glory and more a killer haymaker of power-pop and punk rock. Given the track record of most super groups, this album shouldn't be as good as it is. Think the Go-Gos meets Patti Smith meets Bikini Kill. The album works because Wild Flag works as a unit — a band first and a super-group second. There are plenty of stereotypes about all-female rock bands, and Wild Flag transcends every one with tracks like "Romance" and "Future Crimes." Wild Flag's self-titled debut is one of the best rock records of 2011.

**Desperate Lines** Telekinesis 12

"Fell in love in the summer by the springtime we were done" sings Michael Benjamin Lerner on Telekinesis' 2011 release *12 Desperate Straight Lines*. This pretty much lets you know what's in store in this breezy, summery collection of pop songs referencing everyone from the Kinks to Nirvana to the Cure. Featuring Death Cab for Cutie's Chris Walla, *12 Desperate Lines* captures that rare quality of great '80s music when you're not sure if you want to dance — you know, like Ally Sheedy in *Breakfast Club* — or lock yourself up in your bedroom and cry. "Please Ask For Help" is worthy of Robert Smith's best tunes, followed up with "50 Ways" — which brings back '90s radio in all its fuzzy power-chord glory. But Telekinesis is far from pastiche. This is just great pop music for the post-Woodstock crowd — those who remember when MTV still played videos.

William Kennedy is a freelance local arts and culture critic who can be read in EW and Eugene Magazine. He spent many years working in local record stores. He lives with his wife Kim and daughter Olive, who both politely accommodate his obsession with Doctor Who.

staff picks

**Blessed**
Lucinda Williams

Forget about the gold records, the multiple Grammy Awards and being named "America's best songwriter" by *Time*. Forget about Santa Cruz naming Sept. 6 "Lucinda Williams Day" and Vic Chesnutt writing a song entitled "Lucinda Williams." Forget about her collaborations with Elvis Costello, Ryan Adams, Emmylou Harris and Steve Earle. Forget about all that, because all you need to know about singer/songwriter Lucinda Williams is this: One of her songs made a past poet laureate weep like a little baby.

Yeah, sure, the famous poet just happened to be her father, Miller Williams, a fact that takes absolutely nothing away from the song, "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road," an intimate, crushing evocation of childhood alienation found on Williams' 1998 masterwork of the same name. Williams sings hurt and loneliness like Van Gogh paints haystacks and whores: with a passion inseparable from style, delivered in thick, idiomatic details that overwhelm reality and grant language to the spirit. With her scorched, gravelly vocals and inimitable ear for melody, Williams — with nary a hit to her name — has painstakingly crafted a body of work that stands beside not only that of our greatest of country/western artists but of any American songwriter of any generation.

Since the breakthrough release of *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, Williams' career has been, according to critical opinion, uneven — if by uneven you mean not quite perfect. *World Without Tears* (2003) and *West* (2007) are great albums. But there is an unmistakable aura and buzz about her latest release, *Blessed*, that harks back to the fire she captured more than a decade back — something essential, like tapping the cosmic mainline. Nobody writes better songs about self-destruction than Lucinda, and with "Copenhagen" — one of her greatest heartbreakers yet — Williams turns a friend's suicide into an agonizingly pure monument to the senselessness of any loss. *Blessed*, as with the best of her work, is a bittersweet blend of hopelessness and hope, love and longing, and it finds Williams, at 57, hitting yet another artistic peak with what might be her finest collection to date. — *Rick Levin*

**Atma**
YOB

While the whole shopping local thing is in style, there's no better opportunity to buy the vinyl of that one critically acclaimed underground-turned-international Eugene doom metal band, YOB. YOB swirls chasms of psychedelic aura into its slow, repetitive riffs and song structures —

songs that span themes as broad and universal as Buddhist mysticism, and rhetoric as varied as stream of consciousness and mantra. As recordings go, vinyl only enhances the organic quality of the album. It's like hearing fern fractals grow, or watching a cougar gracefully maul a deer while meditating in the forest.

YOB frontman Mike Scheidt's vocals are the most varied they've ever been and these songs push him to explore more challenging spaces. From higher octaves reminiscent of Rush's Geddy Lee or Black Sabbath's Ozzy Osbourne to low death growls that reverberate your "heartcenter," *Atma* is an easy snag from House of Records. YOB will have you and your loved ones wondering what took you so long to get into local metal. — *Andrew Hitz*