

EW'S
TOP 12 ALBUMS
OF 2012

The ongoing proliferation and fragmentation of music production, especially nonlabel productions, makes choosing the top 12 albums of 2012 an impossible and foolish task — but here at EW, we're OK with attempting the impossible and playing the fool sometimes. And as far as last-minute gifting goes, there aren't many things as easy to give as music — it's affordable and ubiquitous, whether it's a download, CD or vinyl. To make it even easier, we've singled out each album's hot tracks, because what's more fun than making and giving a mix tape?



Kendrick Lamar
good kid, m.A.A.d city

If you haven't heard of Kendrick Lamar, you should probably drop what you're doing and queue up a tune from his autobiographic sophomore studio album, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*. Lamar is the artist all your favorite hip-hop artists are listening to, and his album plays out like a powerful, beat-heavy biopic. Start with "Sherane a.k.a. Master Splinter's Daughter" and let the album unfold in order, closing with "Compton." Lamar — who points to Tupac Shakur as his greatest musical influence — writes smart and poignant songs, drawing on his upbringing in Compton, eloquently singing or dropping lyrics like "Everybody gonna respect the shooter/ But the one in front of the gun lives forever," ("Money Trees"). "Swimming Pools (Drank)" is a moody, boozy, party-ready gem, accompanied by an equally atmospheric music video.

TRACK: "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst"
— Alex Notman

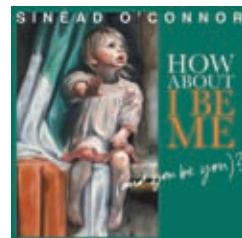
Soul Asylum
Delayed Reaction

Reared in an '80s Minneapolis scene that also bred Hüsker Dü and The Replacements, Soul Asylum has been plying its gritty pop-punk-rock for three decades

running, and *Delayed Reaction* is a wizened amuse-bouche that samples the band's considerable range, moving from high-octane pop ("Gravity," "The Juice") and alt-country ("By the Way") to unshakeable melodic gems ("Into the Light," "Take Manhattan").

TRACK: "Into the Light (Breaking Horses)"
— Rick Levin

Sinéad O'Connor
How About I Be Me (and You Be You)



Sinéad O'Connor is that rare pure thing: an unconstructed rebel and courageous artist possessing oodles of talent and a golden throat. At 45, having survived a nearly mythic rise and fall, O'Connor has produced her finest work: not only the comeback of the year but perhaps 2012's best album, a tour-de-force containing at least three certifiable classics in "Reason with Me," "Old Lady" and "The Wolf Is Getting Married."

TRACK: "The Wolf is Getting Married"
— Rick Levin

Lindi Ortega
Cigarettes & Truckstops

Having cut her teeth for a decade-plus in the Toronto indie scene, Lindi Ortega relocated to Nashville and cut *Cigarettes & Truckstops* with producer Colin Linden, who has worked with Lucinda Williams, Emmylou Harris and The Band, among others. Talk about a match made in country music heaven: Linden captures the crystalline perfection of Ortega's voice, which is redolent of such greats as Tammy Wynette and Dolly Parton, with a dark edge that is all her own.

TRACK: "Demons Don't Get Me Down"
— Rick Levin

Twin Shadow
Confess

Perfect for your friend who watched "Drive" as much for the synth-pop soundtrack as for Ryan Gosling's piercing baby blues. George Lewis Jr.'s second album has a distinct '80s power dance feel, with sharp lyrics, infectious beats and shredding guitars. As Stefon of *Saturday Night Live* fame would say, "It's got everything."

TRACK: "You Call Me On"
— Jackie Varriano



Grimes
Visions

Claire Boucher, a pint-sized (and occasionally eyebrow-less) electronic princess who uses the stage name Grimes, is Canada's best musical export since Alanis. Her album "Visions" is a falsetto-ridden romp through a world filled with loops and layers, perfect for someone with a fondness for cotton candy and technology. Slightly lisped lyrics make it virtually impossible not to sing along.

TRACK: "Oblivion"
— Jackie Varriano



Regina Spektor
What We Saw from the Cheap Seats

Not just for your adorkable friend, the gift of Russian-born pixie Regina Spektor's latest album is a gift full of stunning sentimentalism. Good for giving rainy days a sun-filled injection, Spektor's thoughtful lyrics will charm even the cynics. With the must-have song "Don't Leave Me (*Ne Me Quitte Pas*)," why not learn a foreign language phrase while doing a happy dance?

TRACK: "Don't Leave Me (*Ne Me Quitte Pas*)"
— Jackie Varriano

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