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ALL THINGS MUSIC

Music's fab firsts and beyond

BY BRIAN MCELHINEY • For The Bulletin

You have your whole life to write your first album, and just months to write your second album. If you're a musician or an astute music fan, you've probably come across some variation of this statement before. And for many musicians, it's painfully true. You start playing an instrument, you discover you can make some pretty cool noise and you start refining that noise into actual songs.

If you're lucky, your songs find an audience. If you're really lucky, you get to record those songs and release an album. If you're really, really lucky, you get to make another album.

But that initial, wide-eyed period of discovery can never be duplicated, and once you're in the album release-tour cycle, time is not on your side. Many artists crumble under the pressure, delivering a string of mediocrity after an impressive debut.

Then there are artists who buck the trend. (Imagine if The Beatles stopped after "Please Please Me.") They continue to hone their sound, or evolve into something else entirely. Sometimes that "something else entirely" happens on album four, or album five, and it isn't until that moment that the group or musician comes into their own.

The following list will examine some of our (read: my) favorite examples of both of these types of first albums. The first half is dedicated to albums that got it right straight out of the gate. The second half features debuts that have been forgotten by time: They either sound nothing like the artists' best-known material, or they're embryonic,

pointing toward greatness to come.

EXHIBIT A: NO. 1 IS NO. 1

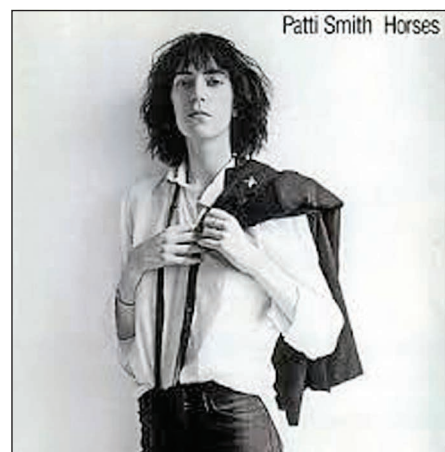
"Ramones," Ramones

Punk rock's clarion call, the 1976 debut album from the New York City bruddahs set the template for just about everything the genre is known for: buzzsaw guitars, revved-up tempos, disaffected commentary on society (and some unfortunate, tongue-in-cheek Nazi imagery that nevertheless hasn't aged all that well). While the Ramones would go on to release many more albums, the group never again hit the heights of this half-hour blast of energy.

Also of note: The Sex Pistols' 1977 debut "Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols" was so influential, the band never followed it up (sure, that's the reason).

"Illmatic," Nas

New York rapper Nas is still regarded as one of the genre's best, and his 1994 debut album "Illmatic" introduced the world to his literate storytelling and impeccable musicianship (aided by producers such as DJ



Patti Smith Horses

Lauryn Hill," in 1998, and to date it remains her only solo release.

"Horses," Patti Smith

Punk rock's poet priestess Patti Smith helped set the template for punk and alternative with 1975's minimalist "Horses." Over simple yet aggressive garage rock progressions, Smith snarls and spits sordid tales of New York City's underground. The album almost single-handedly kicked off the art-punk movement and influenced everyone from R.E.M. to Hole.

Bonus: "Cracked Rear View," Hootie & the Blowfish

Did you know Hootie & the Blowfish released five more albums after its hit-filled 1994 debut album? Why would you? Just "Let Her Cry."

"The Cars," The Cars

Along with Cheap Trick, Squeeze and more, The Cars brought big guitars and hooks to the emerging new wave scene of the '70s and '80s. The quartet came fully formed with 1978's self-titled offering,

Continued on Page 5

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