

CC recommends

selected by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Curse Your Branches

David Bazan
Barsuk



Townes

Steve Earle

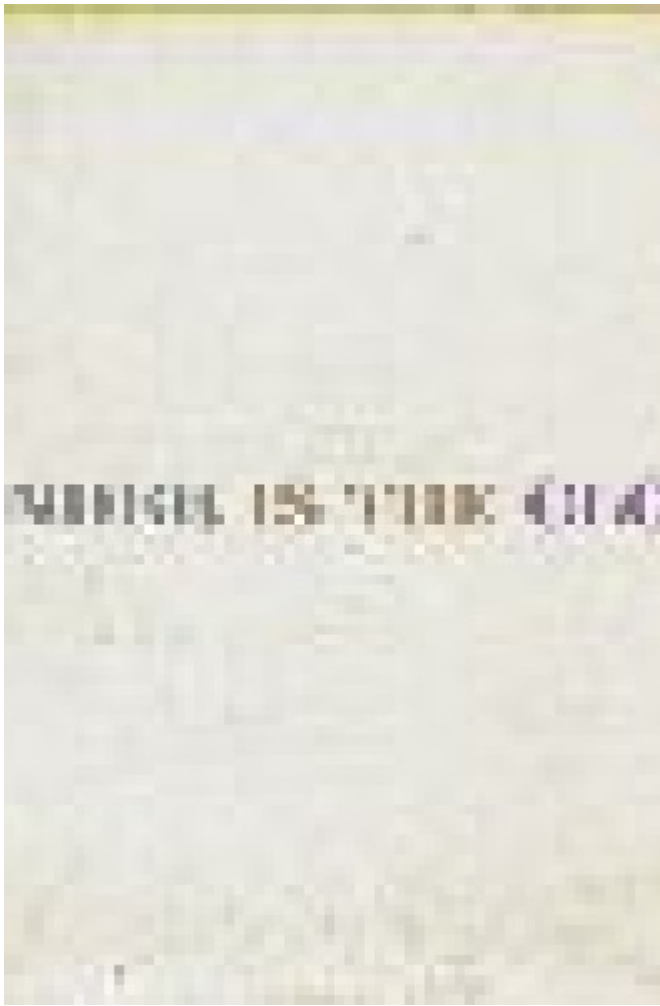
New West



Monsters of Folk

Monsters of Folk

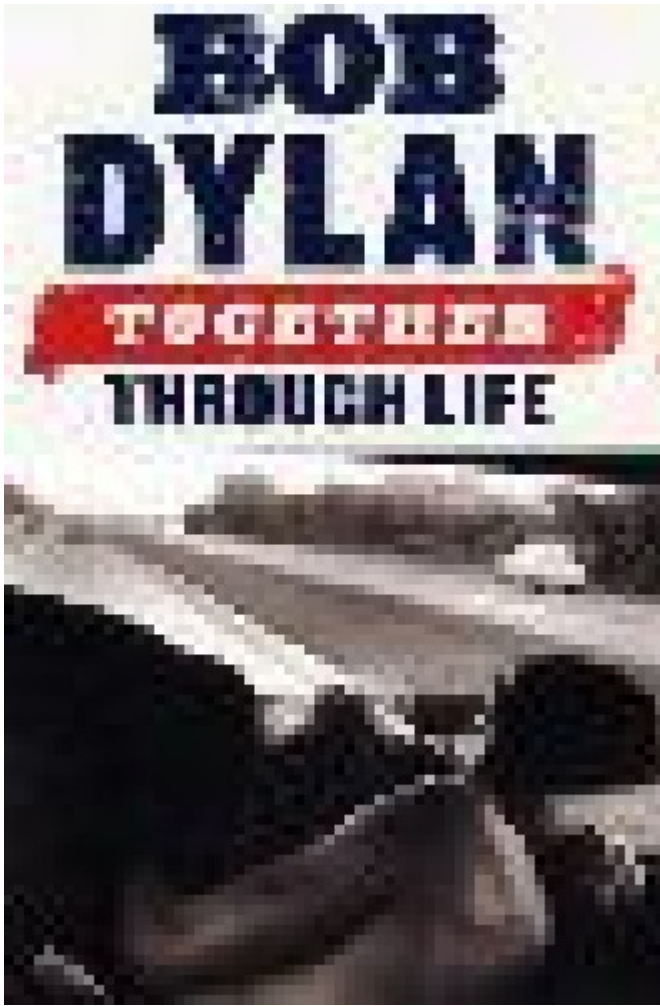
Shangri-La



Yonder Is the Clock

the Felice Brothers

Team Love



Together Through Life

Bob Dylan

Columbia



Come O Spirit! Anthology of Hymns and Spiritual Songs (Vol. 1)

Bifrost Arts

Great Comfort

Dave Bazan, *Curse Your Branches*. Bazan's confessional songwriting is dark and intense, but his impeccable craft makes it a pleasure. Bazan has put out album after album (many as Pedro the Lion) of precisely described internal turmoil set to spare rock and roll—with delectable pop hooks, here more confident and lilting than ever. *Branches* is a post-evangelical twist on a breakup record, chronicling in messy detail Bazan's traumatic loss of a deeply personal faith. It's moving to hear him wrestle with questions of theodicy within the confines of personal-relationship theology: God is either his very good friend or his very bad enemy.

Steve Earle, *Townes*. Notorious for his outspoken activism and his past substance abuse, Earle is also one of the best country singers alive. Here he pays tribute to his

mentor, Texas songwriter Townes Van Zandt. The subtle, mostly acoustic arrangements make their plugged-in moments count (notably in a guest appearance by guitarist Tom Morello). It's a great set from a peerless catalog and well performed. The only flaw is that Earle avoids the excellent gospel numbers from late in Van Zandt's career.

Monsters of Folk, *Monsters of Folk*. The ensemble vocals are the highlight as indie folk stars Conor Oberst and Mike Mogis of Bright Eyes, Yim Yames of My Morning Jacket and solo artist M. Ward join in shimmering harmonies and spirited choruses. Many of the songs are pretty good, too, especially Ward's unique takes on classic folk melody and pre-war pop whimsy. The album focuses frequently on spiritual themes in a way that, if not especially mature, is inquisitive, creative and good-humored.

The Felice Brothers, *Yonder is the Clock*. Unlike Monsters of Folk, the Felice Brothers have one capable singer at best. But Ian Felice's singing makes up in grit and charm what it lacks in beauty, and the band's boozy shout-alongs and tender ballads remind us why we love American music. The unpolished performances filter country-folk and barroom popular song through aggressive playing à la The Band. One raucous chorus—"Well I died in Penn Station tonight, oh Lord"—crystallizes the Felice Brothers' lyrical bent toward dark yet silly exaggerations of classic Americana themes.

Bob Dylan, *Together Through Life*. By now the man's voice sounds like a chainsaw. So one reason to skip Dylan's new Christmas album in favor of this set of originals is that the chainsaw sound is more welcome on these electric blues stompers than at a karaoke bar on Bing Crosby night. Another is that Dylan's sensibilities are as fresh as ever: the resurgence that began with *Time Out of Mind* (1997), an equally bluesy but quieter record, continues. *Together* also offers some old-school Dylan lyrics, right down to the non sequiturs addressed by name to otherwise unknown women.

Bifrost Arts, *Come O Spirit! Anthology of Hymns and Spiritual Songs (Vol. 1)*. The first release from Great Comfort Records, a new label run by Christian indie pop hero Daniel Smith, his wife and his parents and devoted to making "sacred music for the invisible church." It's largely a record of traditional hymns, reimagined not as bombastic praise choruses but as quietly ambitious folk-pop arrangements. The project breathes much fresh life into the beloved old songs of the church.

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