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In Review



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The Harrow and the Harvest, by Gillian Welch. Gillian Welch takes some but not all of her cues from old Nashville and older Appalachia. While a lot of artists matching this description leaven their traditionalism with jazzy complexity or gauzy pop sheen, Welch looks to Neil Young and The Band. This rock edge came to the songwriting fore on *Time (The Revelator)* (2001); the acoustic-duo sound (with longtime collaborator David Rawlings) remained. *The Harrow* pushes this winning formula further, its even timbre melding some of Welch's old-timiest songs with others that barely signify "country" at all. While the recording preserves a good bit of compositional spontaneity, Welch and Rawling's masterful restraint never falters. A similar restraint infuses Welch's fine rhythm guitar and clawhammer banjo, along with the duo's deadpan close harmony—all of which is deliciously offset by the

schooled yet slightly reckless way Rawlings attacks his guitar.

The Head and the Heart, by The Head and the Heart. This new band's sound has roots in the indie-folk scene, with its moody treatments of simple chord progressions and Americana rhythms. But the larger thread here is classic pop, and *The Head and the Heart* offers the complete package: polished songwriting, ambitious style changes and especially tight harmonies—the three singers, unmemorable by themselves, blend their voices expertly and joyfully. The band shows some instrumental chops as well, particularly Kenny Hensley. (It's always great to hear a young band with a piano player who isn't just a guitarist who dabbles.) Hensley's tasty playing drives a lot of the band's earthy yet breezy sound. It's the feel-good record of the year.

Say Goodbye, by Liz Janes. Liz Janes calls this a soul album, but it's no straight-ahead salute to Memphis. Still, soul is as good a word as any for this quiet, strange but above all groovy little record. A lot of the pleasure comes from Janes's rhythmically intense singing—a couple of the songs include long, sparse intros on which you don't need a rhythm section to feel the beat. When the drums and upright bass do show up, they move freely from subdued to jazzy to scattershot. The album also features much outside-the-box electric piano, along with the occasional surprise drop-in by a classic soul horn line. At a couple points, the music strains under the weight of Janes's clumsily theological lyrics. Still, *Say Goodbye* is one of the most pleasantly unusual records to come out in some time.

Mockingbird Time, by the Jayhawks. Mark Olson is a little bit folk-country; Gary Louris is a little bit '70s rock 'n' roll. The two singer-songwriters have always brought out the best in each other, and this year they got the band back together—the Jayhawks lineup that made the best record of the alt-country '90s, *Tomorrow the Green Grass*. "Our goal is to make the best Jayhawks album that's ever been done," said Louris. At this they inevitably fail—the material here is strong, but little of it gets within a country-rock mile of the dark yet raucous perfection of *Green Grass*. Still, the return of Olson (and piano player/third vocalist Karen Grotberg) means the sweet harmonies are back, as are the gritty edges that eluded the band in Olson's absence. Meanwhile, Louris's emphasis on acoustic work brings a welcome mellowness to his guitar heroics.

Helplessness Blues, by Fleet Foxes. Fleet Foxes' self-titled 2008 debut created something fresh and mysterious out of familiar American tropes: Celtic-laced tunes,

full-throated harmony, formalist songwriting that's equal parts Pete Seeger and Brian Wilson, boatloads of reverb. On *Helplessness Blues*, the scruffy young band preserves all this but tones it down a tad (the big-harmony choruses are a bit fewer and farther between), leaving space to expand the palette. The melodic vocabulary is broader, digging into multiple folk musics domestic and foreign. And the classic pop reference points are more confident, more playful and more richly intertwined with the folk material. In other words, there's a hefty dose of early Paul Simon here, which Fleet Foxes makes delightfully its own. It's a terrific sophomore effort, solidifying hopes for years of great music from this band.

Bad As Me, by Tom Waits. Since *Swordfishtrombones* (1983), each studio record from Tom Waits has been a major aural event, a circus of left-field arrangement and production. If his tracks are sometimes polarizing, they've got nothing on the voice he lays over them—fans compare it to Howlin' Wolf, detractors to Cookie Monster. Waits's first proper record in seven years finds him in strong voice and at the top of his sonic game; it's also long on succinctly crafted tracks and short on experimental meanderings. Perhaps a record this accessible will reveal to Waits skeptics what the rest of us know: behind the clinks and clangs and the carnival barking is a songwriter on the shortlist for best alive. Most versatile, too—one minute he's hitting blues rock heavy; the next he's gone prewar pop, with every shred of Berlin's emotion, Porter's wit and Weill's macabre edge.