

TD's Top Ten for 2015

It was a tough year to pick a favorite, but two of my "heavy rotation" albums from the year carry on the legacy of the late, great Levon Helm and his magnificent Rambles. The first is the fabulous solo debut from his daughter **Amy Helm** (www.amyhelm.com); the second is from Rambles bandleader and gifted multi-instrumentalist and songwriter **Larry Campbell & Teresa Williams** (www.redhouserecords.com). We had the pleasure of seeing both of them and their amazing backing bands live at Montalvo this year... and the joy and superb musicianship they brought to their performances continue to resonate and inspire. They may not yet be household names, but they'll probably receive just a bit too much mainstream media attention to qualify for *this* list, which celebrates my favorite somewhat more obscure releases of 2015. They are listed below in alpha order. Enjoy! And, as usual, let me know what new music has been memorable for you this year.

Bixiga 70 III (www.glitterbeat.com)

One of the highlights of our year was a visit to Sao Paulo and the heavenly beach community of Barra do Sahy. This local ensemble really captures the energy and spirit of this amazing metropolis of 22 million ... super cool, irresistible grooves with an Afrobeat filigree evocative of the mindblowing local street art. For those inclined to *cumbia*, (and who isn't?) I stumbled on a real gem from Chile browsing the bins at good old Amoeba Records: **Chico Trujillo** *Reina de todas las Fiestas* (www.barbesrecords.com) Bailar!

Amy Black *The Muscle Shoals Sessions* (www.amyblack.com)

My favorite North Alabama songbird journeys home from Nashville to take a deep drink from the well of inspiration that is the legendary Fame Studios in Muscle Shoals. She not only does credit to some fabled soul classics, but also shows off her own substantial songwriting chops. It's not just the sacred space that inspires; she's also backed by some of the original Swampers house band, including Spooner Oldham and Will Kimbrough. You're gonna love it!

CeDell Davis *Last Man Standing* (www.sunyatarecords.com)

A fitting epitaph for the life and work of one of the last of the original Delta Bluesmen. Born to sharecroppers in Helena, AR, he *lived* the blues, including long years of obscurity. Wheelchair bound at age 90, he totally delivers on this, his final disc. We lost him earlier this year, but his authentic voice lives on. Enduring. Essential. For those who hunger for a bit more urban edge, check out this year's stellar release from **Joe Louis Walker** *Everybody Wants a Piece* (www.joelouiswalker.com).

Della Mae (www.rounder.com) (www.dellamae.com)

Third excellent release from this Boston-bred, Nashville-based quartet of super-talented youngsters who captivate with their tasty playing and gorgeous harmonies. For those who question whether our government ever gets it right, they've been representing the U.S. as part of the State Department's

Music Ambassadors program (15 countries in 2014). They can represent me any time! If this is the kind of stuff that tickles your pickle, you might also want to check out their buddies **Front Country**'s new disc *Sake of the Sound* (www.frontcountryband.com).

Nigel Hall *Ladies and Gentlemen...Nigel Hall* (www.feelmusicgroup.com)

Regular readers of this list know that funk is *always* an essential ingredient of my music year. 2015's recommendation is the solo debut of NOLA soul/funk keyboards grandmaster Nigel Hall. He's been a critical component of Lettuce and Soulive, and now he steps up to the mic ... and does not disappoint! This is essential listening. Just try and sit still while you're doing so! For those who might lean to a bit more of a slow burn approach, please examine Bay Area emerging faves **Legally Blynd**'s new release *You* (www.legallyblyndmusic.com).

The London Souls *Here Come the Girls* (www.feelmusicgroup.com)

Every now and then you know you just need to *crank it up* and let it ROCK! This is one of my favorites for listening in the car where you can play it as loud as you like. You'll see the fine hand of Eric Krasno here as well as producer. The man's got taste, what can you say? I can't wait to see what else is forthcoming from his new Feel label.

The Brothers Landreth *Let It Lie* (www.thebroslandreth.com)

It's a cold dark winter's night on the endless plains of Manitoba. Off in the distance, you see a light coming from a barn and pick up the faint traces of some soulful brotherly harmonies and spinetingling guitar. Come on in for a listen. You'll be glad you did!

Gretchen Peters *Blackbirds* (Scarlet Letter Records)

If you're a fan of exceptional songwriting, interpreted by the artist herself, backed by some extraordinary Nashville cats (but not slickly produced) ... this is for you. She establishes a mood and tone that will linger with you long after listening. Superb!

Songhoy Blues *Music in Exile* (Atlantic)

Ordinarily you wouldn't find a major label release on this list, but this is a worthy exception. The bad times continue in Mali. Fortunately its exceptional musicians are continuing to find a way to be heard. This powerful music was born of violence and displacement. It shouts *defiance* to those who would banish music from their world. Also essential listening: the latest from Ghanian highlife master, the legendary **Pat Thomas and his Kwashibu Area Band** (www.strutrecords.com) Both these offerings of the spirit deserve to be played at maximum possible volume. Make a joyful noise amidst the chaos!

Chad Takatsugi *Ahuwale* (Koops2 Entertainment, LLC) available from www.mele.com

Transcendent beauty from Hawaii. The title translates variously as: exposed, conspicuous, prominent, obvious, in plain view. Quoting from his liner notes, “these compositions are about love, regret, trust, caution, confidence and insecurity, all providing an unobstructed glimpse of me..... Listen to these mele with the same abandon with which they were created.” Also, if you haven’t been following **Kuana Torres Kahele’s** fabulous series of albums devoted to each of the Hawaiian Islands, it’s not too late to catch up with this year’s Vol. 3 *Pi’ilani Maui*.



Lagniappe: *Contemporary Cowboys*

Far from the gloss of today’s Nashville “bro” culture, some noteworthy artists are each trying to recapture and reclaim the original spirit of “Country Western” as Dwight Yoakam once did... each in their own different way. Here are three worth a listen:

Jason James (www.NewWestRecords.com) Viva Austin, baby!

Sam Outlaw *Angeleno* (www.samoutlaw.com) produced by Ry and Joachim Cooder in North Hollywood (once home to the Palomino Club and Nudie’s Western Wear)!

Daniel Romano *If I’ve Only One Time Askin’* (www.NewWestRecords.com) Oh, Canada!