

TD's Top Ten for 2012

My two favorite albums of the year came from North and South of the Border. **Rose Cousins**, the pride of Halifax, NS, produced a true gem entitled *We Have Made a Spark*. Meanwhile, the legendary **Jimmy Cliff** hooked up with Tim Armstrong to cut the glorious *Rebirth*, a potent reminder to me of how much I miss classic reggae. Both discs are essential listening, but they have received too much mainstream attention from NPR and the Grammy nominators to make my official list, which celebrates my slightly more obscure favorites of the past year, presented below in alpha order.

Brand New Strings *Stay Tuned* www.RuralRhythm.com

My favorite bluegrass release is from Eastern Tennessee, featuring superb young fiddler Preston Schmidt. If you prefer a slightly more contemporary string band sound, check out Virginia's equally young **Steel Wheels'** *Lay Down Lay Low* at www.thesteelwheels.com

Michael "Iron Man" Burks *Show of Strength* www.alligator.com

Sadly, we lost a great one this year... far too soon at the age of 54. But if this is to be his epitaph, it's a fitting tribute to his powerful spirit and blistering guitar work, honed by many long years on the road. Perhaps it was his Arkansas roots that caused him to remind me of a younger B.B. King in his prime.

Eric Lee *Kawehilani* www.ericleehawaii.com

Found this one at the venerable Hungry Ear Records in Kailua, Oahu. Bruddah Eric serves up two scoop *mana* topped with some tasty slack key guitar. Transcendent! For those with a taste for Jawaiian, also check out **Innavision's** latest release *No Stopping*. www.innavisionmusic.com

JD McPherson *Signs and Signifiers* www.rounder.com

From Broken Arrow, OK and recorded at the all-analog Hi-Style studio in Chicago, but you'd swear it was straight out of Sun Studios in Memphis. Some might call his sound retro; I call it Roots Rock at its finest.

Gretchen Peters *Hello Cruel World* www.gretchenpeters.com

Marvelous songwriting that really grabs you like Rosanne Cash at her best. Backed by the amazing Will Kimbrough, Viktor Krauss and a first-rate ensemble of players. Recommended for late night listening.

The Soul Rebels *Unlock Your Mind* www.rounder.com

I didn't manage to make it to NOLA this year, but this disc will transport you straight there. These Brothers be representin' the 504 in fine fashion. "Everybody, get up on the floor; enjoy yourself!" To be played at maximum volume for full effect!

The Staves *Dead & Born & Grown* www.thestaves.com

And now for something *completely* different... From Watford, UK come the heavenly three-part harmonies of the comely Stavely-Taylor sisters. More singer/songwriter in sensibility than folk, because they write almost all of their own material. If you like the Wailin' Jennys, give them a listen.

Joanne Shaw Taylor *Almost Always Never* www.joanneshawtaylor.com

She comes on all Jailbait/Trailer Trash on the album cover, and the music inside doesn't disappoint. She rocks the house, and her guitar solo on centerpiece "Jealousy" is one of the finest recorded this year or any other year for that matter. She's one heck of a songwriter as well. In a similar SRV vein, featuring some stellar Stratocaster workouts, check out **Albert Cummings'** *No Regrets* www.albertcummins.com

Titina *Portrait* www.networkmedien.de

Stumbled onto this one while bin diving at good old Amoeba Records. She's from Cape Verde and is/was a contemporary of Cesaria Evora (and perhaps overshadowed by her a bit). A formidable interpreter of traditional *morna* (reminiscent of *fado*) and *coladeira* tunes, inspired by African and Brazilian rhythms. Deep Soul for those contemplative moments; perfect for a rainy afternoon or evening.

Kristen Ward *Last Night on Division* www.kristenward.com

A self-released labor of love that was several years in the making. It will hopefully be a breakout disc for this under-appreciated Seattle-area fave. She's got singer-songwriter chops reminiscent of a Patty Griffin, but most definitely *rocks*. Not to be missed!

Lagniappe

A few marvelous releases from 2011 that I didn't come across until 2012

Creole String Beans *Shrimp Boots & Vintage Suits* www.creolestringbeans.com Primo swamp rock from the Bayou!

Fatoumata Diawara *fatou* (World Circuit/Nonesuch) sultry, slinky mesmerizing grooves from Mali.

Beth McKee *Next to Nowhere* www.bethmckee.com Soulful, rockin' Southern white girl tour de force.

Betty Wright and The Roots *Betty Wright the Movie* www.s-curverecords.com inspired pairing!

Finally... we lost another great small independent record store this year... the wonderful Melody Records which was a fixture on DuPont Circle for more than thirty years (and one of my favorite stops in DC). Thanks for introducing me to so much great music. Much missed! R.I.P.

Keep on rockin' in the Free World!

Tom David

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