

the best albums of the 90's

kirby ferguson gets the jump on the competition and doesn't even wait for the decade to end to rundown the nineties' 25 best albums

Of course, the decade isn't even half over, but as my days as an amateur rock crit draw to a close, I feel compelled to organize my criticism into some kind of semi-coherent whole. As a critic I have covered every year of the nineties except 1990, listening to more albums than any healthy person should. The following is an attempt to catalogue this decade's finest music--undoubtedly, a futile task; however, I feel I am offering a fairly definitive cross-section of the 90's biggest and best music.

A "decade" is really nothing more than a unit of measure, invented by critics and historians to ease analysis of the past. And really, there was no difference between 1988 and 1990; however, there was a huge difference between 1992 and 1989. The contrast was that alternative music was amalgamated by the mainstream and the world in general seemed to get hipper. The charts are now more tolerant and varied than I've ever seen them,



currently hosting the likes of Pearl Jam, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Frank Sinatra and Garth Brooks. We are in the midst of a musical/cultural revolution--just like punk, just like Woodstock, just like Elvis.

Even before grunge, some fine music was still being put out, much of it by 60's rock vets. Neil Young's *Ragged Glory* (4) returned him to what some would argue he does best: sloppy, epic Crazy Horse rock'n'roll. Paul Simon's *The Rhythm of the Saints* (4) may have been regarded as a disappointment after the immense critical and popular success of *Graceland*, but the album is actually more compellingly dark and organic, if less tuneful, than that album. Heavy on atmosphere, the hooks of *Graceland* appear only infrequently, but *The Rhythm of the Saints* is an ultimately rewarding listen and may be Simon's most overlooked album. Richard Thompson's *Rumor and Sigh* (4) is the kind of stuff critics adore: brainy, of limited appeal and virtuosic. While Thompson is clearly capable of music of greater resonance, the album is a virtual rock'n'roll masters thesis. Robbie Robertson's *Storyville* (4) is a similar affair. While skilfully crafted, the cleanliness of the album is a little disturbing, especially considering that the Band's best music was always so unvarnished.

Some of grunge's ancestors were around in the early 90's, struggling to move their albums. The Replacements' swansong, *All Shook Down* (4), ditches the sterility of *Don't Tell a Soul*, but keeps the restraint. A tuneful album, with some of Westerberg's most beautiful songs in "Sadly Beautiful" and "The

Alice in Chains



Last." Sonic Youth's major label debut, *Go* (4), beefs up and streamlines the band's attack. Of course, masochists claimed it was a sell-out, but the added structure just makes the riffs hit harder.

Sinead O'Connor's sophomore effort, *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got* (4.5), inspired equal amounts of adoration and loathing. As evidenced by a song like "The Emperor's New Clothes," this is a damn arrogant album. Fortunately, it's also a great one, one of the decade's top five. O'Connor displays an understated, yet powerful touch, especially on the quieter numbers ("Feel So Different," "Black Boys on Mopeds," "Nothing Compares 2 U").

Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* (4.5) is their densest and most apocalyptic work, and, I think, their best. But the decade's

best album actually came from its most consistently inventive practitioners, the Beastie Boys, whose third album, *Check Your Head* (4.5), amalgamates punk and rap with wholly satisfying and exciting results.

Like Lenny Kravitz, the Black Crowes' rip-offs are often as good as the real thing, but unlike Kravitz they are consistent. Actually, the band is probably better than many of the acts they rip-off (Humble Pie, The Faces, Aerosmith, even the post-Exile Stone). Their two albums, *Shake Your Money Maker* (4) and *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* (4), are so consistent, choosing between the two is virtually impossible--so I've selected both. Their debut, *Money Maker*, is a more solid set of tunes, but *Musical*

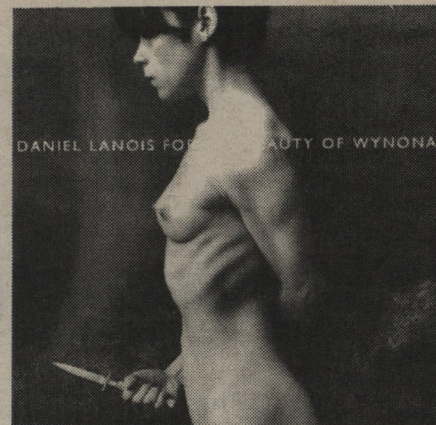


Companion is richer and features superior musicianship.

U2 reinvented themselves in 1990 with *Achtung Baby* (4.5), a highly artificial and sometimes dissonant album that originally alienated many listeners. Emotionally, it leaves me cold, but it is a stunning set of songs, with gorgeous ballads like "One" and "Tryin' to Throw Your Arms Around the World," along with imaginative rockers like "The Fly" and "Mysterious Ways". With 1991's beautiful *Out of Time* (4.5), REM stepped to rock's forefront as one of its biggest acts. The band has steadfastly refused rock's sillier rituals and their albums maintain an intimacy that U2's don't. "Losing My Religion" may be the 90's greatest song. *Out of Time's* prompt follow-up, *Automatic For the People* (5), was, astoundingly, even

better, and probably their best yet. Michael Stipe has become one of the most distinct and moving vocalists of our day.

Of course, nothing was the same after Nirvana's *Nevermind* (4). It is certainly one of the most important albums ever released, but not only that, it's a great pop album. *In Utero* (4.5) was even better, stripping things down and restoring the grit. Pearl Jam's debut, *Ten* (4), was the second biggest seller of the time, but it is rather spotty and sometimes plodding; what carries it is the potent singles: "Jeremy,"



"Even Flow," "Alive." For my money, though, grunge's best album is Alice in Chains' devastating second effort, *Dirt* (5), on which the band piles on the fury like nothing I've ever heard before.

One of grunge's forefathers, Bob Mould, reestablished himself in the nineties with his new band, Sugar. On their debut, *Copper Blue* (4.5), the hooks were beefed up, the material was consistently melodic and there was muscle to galvanize the melody. Nonetheless, *Copper Blue* didn't prepare us for their second effort, the e.p. *Beaster* (5), a volcanic half-hour whirlwind. The album is both angrier and more melodic than anything by Husker Du and is unquestionably a masterpiece. My favourite of the nineties.

Of Bruce Springsteen's two simultaneously released 1992 albums, I'll take the slicker and better-written of the two, *Human Touch* (4), although *Lucky Town* features some great songs ("Living Proof," "Souls of the Departed," "The Big Muddy"). As is the case with Guns'n'Roses' *Use Your Illusion* releases (which are simply too patchy to make this list), a

combination of the two albums could have produced a masterpiece.

Peter Gabriel's 1992 effort, *Us* (4), is certainly padded, but the best moments are sublime: "Digging in the Dirt," "Blood of Eden," "Washing of the Water." While lacking the consistent melodic appeal of *So*, the album is more natural and its highpoints far surpass those of that album.

Los Lobos redefined themselves with the evocative *Kiko* (4.5), a quirky and inventive album

that maintains its roots. Easily one of the most resonant albums of the decade.

Daniel Lanois surprised many with his second album, *For the Beauty of Wynona* (4), which increases the rock fire-power and features improved vocal confidence from Lanois.

Counting Crowes' 1993 release, *August and Everything After* (5), is the decade's strongest debut. A gorgeous set of unforgettable songs, *August and Everything After* has aroused towering expectations.

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