



100 Songs for 2010: Aaron's Listening Guide

Tip of Your Tongue, Top of My Lungs

I'm done with being right. I really am. If I learned one thing in 2010, it was this.

It was a year of sending angry, 2,000 word emails defending Twins pitcher Scott Baker ... to a friends of mine who is also a die-hard Twins fan. It was a year of following a hundred snarky Twitter feeds ... occasionally chuckling along, but mostly feeling like I was wasting my life on needless sarcasm. It was a year spent reading negative reviews of albums I enjoyed on first listen ... and often finding myself agreeing with the reviewer, because online takedowns are exceedingly persuasive. I don't know if my generation can compete on a global scale, but we definitely rule the world when it comes to vitriolic internet screeds. If Twitter has taught us nothing else, it's that 140 characters can be combined into an infinite number of ways to say, "This sucks!" It was a full-time job, staying current on why everything was terrible. I became confused with the process of being right. And so I tried to give it up completely.

That's a gross overstatement, of course. It's still incredibly important to be right the vast majority of the time. A seemingly impossible number of everyday decisions still have real-world consequences. Choosing a job, or a school, or friends, or investments ... for

the majority of anyone's day, the pressure to be right is enormous and very real. That's kind of the point. So why we decided that it's also important to be right about pop culture ... about things like songs, or bands, or teams, or television shows ... it blows my mind. This should be our haven from the necessity of being right. And maybe for some of you it always has been. Maybe you have no idea what I'm talking about. But I think I bought into this need to be right. I became conditioned by people on the internet telling me that my favorite TV shows were terrible, that my favorite players were worthless, and that my favorite songs were nothing less than a frontal assault on anyone with ears. And so I resolved to be right. This year, my New Year's resolution is a little different: I want to move past the desire to be right where being right has no actual value.

So what happened? How did I get to the point where I felt it necessary to write a thousand-word essay basically explaining why I am finally free to ... um ... actually like the things I like? As with basically all of the world's problems, I blame the internet. Between our appointed arbiters of taste, our aggregations of the views of the masses, and our statistical proofs of quality, it became possible to make objective arguments for previously subjective determinations. *That album got a 5.4 on Pitchfork. That restaurant only has three stars on Yelp. That pitcher's VORP is below replacement level.* And the natural inclination is to conform to those decrees. "I thought that album was pretty good, but it turns out it's just mediocre. I wonder where I went wrong."

And so the safest possible position to take, when it comes to matters of taste, is just to proclaim that everything is terrible. This is often close enough to the truth. Everything is flawed. Of course it is. So you point out those flaws. And you sound smart. And you sound funny. And jaded. And cool. And effortlessly detached. And, almost always, you will be right.

I never saw *Toy Story 3*, but it was definitely one of the most universally loved movies of 2010. It scored a 99% on Rotten Tomatoes. Do you know what that means? It means if you want to read three negative reviews of the movie, you absolutely can. And I bet all three of them are well-written, and probably make a few good points. I bet no matter how much you loved *Toy Story 3*, you will come away from those reviews loving it a little bit less, kicking yourself for not ferreting out those flaws. This is just human nature.

And this is what I would like to stop doing. I'm not saying the secret to happiness is blind, unconditional love for everything, regardless of quality. I'm not saying we need to embrace the crap, give up looking at art critically ... nothing like that. All I'm saying is that, if your first instinct is to like something ... then like it. Don't start picking at it. Don't seek out a second opinion, because you will find it. Someone on the internet hates everything you love. And that's okay. Don't start looking for the flaws. Because you will find them. And then what? How will that make you any happier?

I think a lot of people spend a lot of time and energy in an attempt to protect themselves from accidentally liking something that turns out to be bad. Which is interesting, because there are absolutely no real-world implications for such a mistake. Watch:

There is a Hanson song on this list. In all honesty, it should probably be ranked even higher.

It's been almost a minute since I typed that sentence, and nothing horrible has happened to me. There's no downside. Maybe a couple of you rolled your eyes. Maybe I'll put this up on the blog and get some negative comments. That's it. Everyone is still alive. And the upside is that I got to listen to this awesome Hanson song probably fifty times this year, and it made me happy every time. That seems like the better end of the bargain.

So, before we start, I'd like to concede every criticism of every one of these songs. They change nothing. Let's get a few of them out of the way right now:

Gaslight Anthem sounds like an overproduced version of the kids from Glee covering Bruce Springsteen. The Hold Steady aren't nearly as dynamic or interesting as they were five years ago. Neither are Drive By Truckers. The Pains of Being Pure at Heart have been writing basically the same song over and over again for their entire career. So have the Thermals. All this critical acclaim for Robyn is just music nerds trying to justify how much they loved "Show Me Love" in 1997. Freelance Whales only exist because yuppies in New York City can't get over how adorable they look. I liked Foxy Shazam better when they were called The Darkness. Sleigh Bells sold out when they signed with M.I.A.'s label. You only like Sambassadeur because they're from Sweden. Actually ... that could apply to a lot of these bands. Every band on Sincerely Yours sounds exactly the same. Tinashe is just ripping off the Kooks. Black Keys are just ripping off The White Stripes. Arcade Fire just want to be all epic now, they're a bloated indie U2. Only rich kids and frat boys listen to Vampire Weekend anymore ...

Fine. Fine. Yes. All of that sounds about right.

And yet, here are 100 songs that consistently made me happy for the last year. So when I die, and I stand before the Ultimate Arbiter of Taste, and he reads from his scroll the final verdict on my song choices for 2010 ... well, that will never happen. No consequences. Ever. I promise.

Most of you will probably disagree with some of the songs on this list. I hope you do. However, when you do inevitably disagree, I only hope that it's because you thought there were other, more deserving songs out there, other songs that made you happier. Because the one thing we should all agree on is that there was a lot of great music released in the last year.

Also, we need to unite in our hatred of Travie McCoy's "Billionaire," because that song is absolutely indefensible.

So here's the list. Thanks for reading. Thanks for listening.

1) The Gaslight Anthem – “Boxer”

So this is the song of the year. Why?

I guess the short answer is that “Song of the Year” is often just another way of saying “Song Aaron and Ilana Spent the Most Time Singing In the Car.” It was true last year, it’s true this year, and I hope it always will be. This song demands to be sung. It is an anthem in the best sense of the word.

The long answer, on the other hand, is going to sound like, “I love this song because I heard it on the radio,” but I hope it goes a little bit deeper than that.

I define almost all of the terms of my relationship with music. I suspect this is true for most of you. Ten years ago, we were sitting in front of the TV, waiting to see what video was next in the rotation,* we were driving around trying to find a decent song on the radio. Under those conditions, a song could hit you. It could absolutely blindsides you. It could be perfectly unexpected. It could make you sit up and take notice.

** This only makes sense if you assume this is taking place at 3 AM, a programming block when MTV actually played music videos in 2000. I know this from far too much experience.*

Today, I always know what’s coming. I sit in front of computer speakers, and I walk around in noise-canceling headphones, and I always know what’s next, because I set up the playlist. Since I control my musical universe, I heard The Gaslight Anthem’s *American Slang* quite a bit this year. It was my favorite record of 2010, and so I heard “Boxer” a lot, basically whenever I wanted to. It was a very comfortable arrangement. I don’t know if it was always my favorite song on the album, but it was always highly enjoyable.

Then it started getting consistent radio play. And things were different.

I’m not one of those people who’s constantly upset at the state of Top 40 radio. It doesn’t bother me that they don’t play the same things I would play, were I in charge. And, truth be told, a few of the songs on this list* did get airplay this year. But I don’t expect it. And I’m okay with that. The very existence of Justin Bieber is not an affront to my sensibilities. It’s the radio. It’s largely pleasant background noise. Just because I can’t tell Taio Cruz from Bruno Mars doesn’t mean I’m angry with pop culture.

** Broken Bells’ “The High Road” and Black Keys’ “Tighten Up” being the main ones.*

So, to hear “Boxer” on the radio, in a store, or in someone else’s car, it elicits that “*Yeah! I love these guys! Turn it up!*” reaction that I really don’t feel very often anymore. It’s ten year old me waiting by the stereo, hoping to tape “Rhythm is a Dancer.” It’s music existing on its own terms. It’s found happiness. It’s how you’ll watch a movie on TV,

commercials and all, even when the DVD is gathering dust on your shelf. It's somehow better that way.

So yes ... I love this song because I heard it on the radio.

2) Yeasayer – “O.N.E.”

When I started this blog, I spent a lot of time talking about the cultural context of music, about the idea that if you love Song X, you like it because of a lifetime of liking some songs and disliking others, and that they were all necessary to get you to a place where you could love Song X, that if you spent an alternate lifetime listening to other music, you would feel completely differently about that same song. My question was always, “If, today, you could listen to a mixtape of your favorite songs from 2025 ... do you think you would like it?” Responses have been split.

“O.N.E.” isn't actually a song from the future, of course, but it certainly sounds that way, and, if this song is any indication, then the answer to the above question is absolutely, “Yes, I would love to hear tomorrow's hits today.”

On October 30, this was Ilana's Song of the Year. It held that title for almost eleven full months. Then Ilana discovered something called Foxy Shazam. It was a valiant effort, Yeasayer.

3) Tinashe – “If You Say So”

Of course there's nothing new under the sun when it comes to rock music. The best songs just show you those familiar elements in a way you're not quite sure if you've ever seen before. Tinashe might have a unique backstory (London by way of Zimbabwe), but he's mining the same ground Britpop artists have been working for more than twenty years now. Those looking for a snarky compliment might call this the best Kooks song ever written, and it's not like those guys were re-inventing the wheel, either.

So we have this song that's very much like all the others. It's better than the others, of course, a propulsive, driving rocket of a song ... but it's cut from the same cloth, no question. There's just this one thing. The only part of this song that eases off the accelerator at all comes right before the first chorus, after the pre-chorus buildup, at 0:39 – two bars of largely isolated piano. It's a little bit of delayed gratification, an old trick, and then the chorus hits, and it works so well, and so you're okay with those eight beats when the song doesn't really go anywhere, and your brain begins to expect it after the second pre-chorus, at around 1:33. So, then, when he skips it ... it's like being struck by lightning.

And I'm not sure I remember hearing that trick before.

4) Robyn – “Dancing on My Own”*

I love Robyn. Wholeheartedly and unironically. Ilana thinks it's funny. A lot of you think it's a little weird. It's just that her songs sounds so intricate, so perfectly constructed, and ... I think she manages to separate the message from the medium.

It's easy to give up on pop music, write it off as vulgar, a lower art form. So much of radio pop does sound assembly-line formulaic, like someone came up with the song title, then the chorus, then built a song around it. And so it's easy to see this as all pop music is capable of. When music sounds like this, is comprised of these elements ... well, it can never be anything but bubblegum. So why get mad when it's terrible? It's *supposed* to be terrible. Just dance, don't think, don't feel. It's only your unrealistic expectations that keep you from enjoying the genre as a necessarily guilty pleasure.

With that as a backdrop, for Robyn to be so intelligent and weird and original, for her to really get *at* something, something deep at the core of the human condition, for her to aspire to *profound* ... it somehow means more when she does it than when Arcade Fire does it, or when The National does it. Because she's doing something that a lot of people implicitly believe is impossible.

** There were two versions of this song released in 2010. I went with the Body Talk Part I EP version. I'm sure most of you have very strong opinions on this choice. I had to follow my heart, you guys.*

5) New Pornographers – “Crash Years”

In which Bill Simmons is our spirit animal.*

I have no idea what this song is really about. It's probably not important. At its core, it's another impossibly catchy AC Newman/Neko Case collaboration. It's an exquisite pop song. How much do lyrics really matter? Listen to them. They're almost purposefully inscrutable. I read an interview with Newman where he actually acknowledged that, as a song gets more traditionally poppy, it's important to add some mystery to the lyrics, lest the whole thing get too sappy. So it's possible he doesn't even want you to know what this song means. But here's my take on it:

I moved to California when people first started throwing around words like “failed state,” when things got so bad they recalled their governor and voted in an action hero to replace him. And yet the California I found has surpassed even my wildest dreams. I got a job when everyone else was losing theirs. I started making money while everyone else watched their savings disappear.

You may be living through them, Aaron, but make no mistake ... you are watching the Crash Years. You may have the same eternity blues as the rest of us, but you are a spectator here, rubbernecking at a tragedy that somehow missed you. This is happening around you. It's a disconnected feeling, isn't it.

And there's no other show like it round here. As a rule.

So ... I would imagine it means something different to you.

** Last year, I copied and pasted a lot of previous blog entries into the year-end Listening Guide. This year, many of the relevant essay were (1) a lot longer, and (2) usually only tangentially connected to the song in question. So I've included one-sentence summaries for some of the essays in here, and I'll put up links on the blog.*

6) Cee-Lo Green – “F* You”**

Let's take a look at this song from a few different angles.

First, and most importantly, this is the closest we've come to the Perfect Pop Song since “Hey Ya!” Musically, this would have been a huge hit at anytime since the 1950s. Musically, this is one of those songs you can already hear on the oldies stations of the future.*

** This has nothing to do with anything, but I think Maroon 5 is going to be huge on the future oldies stations. Just so incredibly inoffensive. Nobody's favorite band, but, more importantly, never hated, either. They will be my generation's Steve Miller Band.*

But ... it's called “F*** You.” Seemingly in the interest of fairness, it manages to work in most of the rest of the popular curse words, too. It's absolutely un-censorable. (There are rumors of a “Forget You” radio edit, but I've honestly never heard it.) It is here to explode the minds of people who equate obscenity with specific genres, like death metal or gangsta rap. My greatest musical regret of 2010 was not being there the first time my Dad heard this song. Mostly because I suspect he secretly loves it.

More than that, though, I think this song is a nice jumping-off point for a discussion of the internet and the shifting role of censorship.

Think about *The Sopranos*. This is a show that could not have been re-written for network television. It was not an issue of editing out some of the language or some isolated violence ... the show would not have worked ... at all ... under the network censorship restrictions. Luckily, HBO didn't have those restrictions, and so we all got to see one of the best shows of all-time exactly as it was meant to be seen. Twenty years earlier, in a world without HBO, the show could not have existed.

TV can push the envelope like that. *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* and *Dexter* obviously, but also shows like *Mad Men* or *Party Down** that maybe *could* have worked, heavily edited, on a network, but are now allowed to operate unfettered. Why even go to the networks? You could make money and win awards and do everything you want to do without dealing with unnecessary restrictions.

** The best show no one has ever seen. I'm giving you 100 music recommendations, but only one TV rec. Please go get the first two seasons of Party Down.*

I don't know what Cee-Lo was thinking when he decided to write this song, and title it as he did. I don't know what the label was thinking when they released it as a single. I might be giving them too much credit here, but I suspect I'm not. I think someone from standards came down the hall and said, "This will never be played on the radio. I mean ... ever. In any form." And Cee-Lo just said, "So what?" Because, if you have a song like this one, a song that could absolutely light the internet on fire ... why would you need the radio?

And this song hit like I've never seen a song hit before. The amount of *sports* blogs who posted this, totally apropos of nothing, who had never posted a song before, was staggering. Within minutes, it seemed like this song was something everyone knew, something that everyone had always known. And in the process, Cee-Lo went from being a generally positively-reviewed novelty (like Nate Dogg, a nice guest on someone else's song) to a world-beating force, as close to universally loved as anyone or anything on the internet can be.

It's always been possible to become a minor viral novelty on blog buzz alone, but Cee-Lo has transcended all of that. "F*** You" has been in the top twenty on iTunes pretty much since it was released. It's up for three Grammys, including Record of the Year and Song of the Year, which are somehow different things. All of this for a song whose absolute, bedrock starting point was "This song simply cannot be played on the radio."

If this is where pop music is going ... how can you not be excited about that?

7) Broken Social Scene – "World Sick"

I think the first six songs on this list describe 2010 as I wanted it to sound.* And, looking back, 2010 really did sound like that a lot of the time. Energetic. Optimistic. Forward-looking. "World Sick," though, comes closest to describing how the *rest* of the year sounded. This song took the top spot on my Halfway 100 countdown, and, in hindsight, I don't think it was a bad choice. Curt said it was too long. And it *is* too long. It loses direction somewhere around the five minute mark. There are times when it threatens to collapse under the weight of its exhausted sentiment. It was a strange choice for an album opener. And ... I feel like that sometimes. I get world sick. I think we all do. I'm lucky to be able to say, with complete honesty, that I felt this way for a small percentage of 2010. But that percentage was still there, and I don't think I'll ever be able to shake it completely, and no song captured the emotion better than this one. It was comforting to hear those words coming from someone else.

** And here we're talking about the music only. Lyrically, I understand that five out of the first six could be classified as depressing. Sorry about that. The "happy song, sad lyrics" combination has always been a winner with me.*

8) The Hold Steady – "The Weekenders"

In which we say, “Thanks for Ja Rule, buddy.”

In which these are rock and roll problems. Isn't that what we wanted?

The conventional wisdom is that you should never meet your heroes. There's just so much that could go wrong, so much that could fail to live up to expectations. It's not that your heroes are secretly jerks who don't deserve your love, it's just that they are real people, people who are tired, or overworked, or late for something, or hung over, or just distant. It's won't mean as much to them as it does to you. It just can't. Better to maintain the distance. Don't put all that unnecessary pressure on your one-sided relationship.

My hero, above all others, is Craig Finn from the Hold Steady. To me, he's more than the frontman of my favorite band of all time. He's a fellow Minnesotan, and he writes about things like geographical identity and personal iconography and conflicted religion better than I could ever hope. He loved the Golden Gophers but he hated all those drawn out winters. He understands that Sal Paradise was right, but also that Jack Kerouac drank himself to death. He wrote a song about the Minnesota Twins, for the love of God, and he always seems so personable and articulate, both onstage and in interviews. I love everything about him. He seems like exactly the kind of guy you'd want to have a beer with. And yet I wasn't sure if I really wanted to meet him. Everyone knows you should never meet your heroes.

It was a late August show at the Catalyst in Santa Cruz. Ilana's family goes way back with Joel, one of the owners of the venue. For my birthday, Ilana got in touch with Joel, secured some free tickets to the show, and broached the subject of potentially going backstage to meet the band. Joel said he would see what he could do, but that not all bands really hung around backstage. Some preferred to stay on the bus. Some were in and out, on to the next town. It was a job for them, after all. He would try to help us, but no guarantees.

So we went to the show. And ... really no one else did. We've seen the Catalyst sold out and packed to the door. Being generous, the place was five percent full for the opening band. It was surreal, being able to overhear the band discuss the set list between songs. Joel wasn't there, was caught up with other business, would try to make it, no promises. Ilana was upset. She worried I would be disappointed. If anything, I was relieved. You should never meet your heroes. Especially after watching those heroes play to an empty room.

The place was maybe a quarter full when Craig and the guys came on stage, but the band played their usual high-energy set. It was my seventh time seeing them live. I'd love to see them seven more. They never disappoint. Halfway through the set, Joel showed up out of nowhere, handing out free drinks and promising to take us backstage. I couldn't believe it. Nervous, I started downing beers to calm myself (this always works, of course), trying to think of what I would say to my hero. I'd written thousands of words

about the band, of course, but it really didn't prepare me for the possibility of actual conversation. How many different ways can you say, "Thank you. You are awesome."

After the show, we immediately headed backstage, which is basically a fenced-in part of the parking lot with a metal roof. Not incredibly glamorous. As Joel predicted, most of the band was already on the tour bus. Only Bobby (the drummer) and the touring keyboardist (who is not an official band member, and whose name I never caught) were hanging around, drinking Coronas and looking bored. There was no backstage "scene" at all. I sheepishly said hi to both of them, shook hands, told them how much I loved the show, and the band, and everything. But past that, I had nothing to say to them. To me, The Hold Steady has always been "Craig Finn and Other People." I think I probably know enough about Tad, the lead guitarist, to carry on a half-decent interview, but that's it. Of course I respected the other guys in the band, but I adored Craig. And Craig was already on the bus. So it goes. Maybe it would have been awkward anyway.

And why shouldn't he be on the bus? He just sang his heart out for a mostly-empty venue in one of the smaller cities on a probably-endless tour, and he had an all-night drive to look forward to, the band on their way to some far-flung SoCal exurb I'd never even heard of.

At this point, a few other fans had gathered, milling around, talking about the band, how much we all loved them, how we totally understood if they just wanted to get on the road. We knew you're not supposed to meet your heroes.

And then Craig Finn came walking around the side of the bus, big smile on his face, still sweaty from the show, like something we had willed into existence. We were stunned, temporarily frozen, eventually stepping forward for handshakes, pictures, maybe an autograph or two. We all talked baseball, and the Minneapolis music scene, and mostly we talked about how awesome it was to be talking to Craig Finn. It was everything we had wanted. It was more than we had dared to expect. A nice, polite meet and greet, instantly forgettable for Craig, an unforgettable five minutes for the rest of us.

And then one of the girls in the group suggested that we all go out for some drinks. It was a carefully-floated suggestion, not demanding anything, one that came expecting a courteous rejection, one ready for a quick slip into, "Yeah, I know you guys have to hit the road, that's cool ... I just had to ask." We had already met our hero. We were playing with house money.

So of course Craig instantly agreed that this was a great idea and went to get the rest of the band.

So of course we all wound up upstairs at 99 Bottles,* the place deserted on a Tuesday night, like it was set up and staffed just for us.

So of course we tried to buy beers for the band, but they insisted on getting a matching round every time, and internally we all debated which story sounded cooler: "I bought

Craig Finn a beer” or “Craig Finn bought me a beer.” Most of us are now able to tell both stories.

So of course Ilana and I wound up at a table with Craig, talking about Kent Hrbek’s fishing show and the simple pleasures of uncool St. Louis Park bars and Thanksgiving (Craig cooks) and Titus Andronicus (the lead singer cat-sits when Craig’s on the road, and is just generally a fascinatingly weird dude) and Australia and how much my grandparents love both Carlos Gomez and the WNBA ... pretty much everything but the band itself. Even in my perfect-world fantasies of hanging out with Craig Finn, I still assumed the conversation would devolve into me gushing about how I love everything he’s ever done while Craig smiled awkwardly and thought of excuses to leave. Awesomely, this did not happen.** People came and went, sat with us, sat with other guys in the band, sat and listened. As far as I was concerned, this was the center of the universe.

So of course Craig seemed far more interested in finding out about us than listening to us praise him. I’m sure he’s gone out drinking with fans on countless occasions, but apparently he never gets tired of meeting new people, not as disciples who worship him, but just as fellow fans of music and beer and staying out way too late on a school night. He was genuinely invested in the conversation the entire time, and I felt like he would have been regardless of the circumstances, even if we didn’t know who he was. More than anything, Craig just seemed like a guy who really likes being around people.

So of course we stayed for hours, me and Ilana and a handful of others, exchanging looks reminding each other that this was really happening, that it was really happening right now, and that if we were lucky, it might continue to happen. And, in re-telling this, I understand that this is the point where we get into minutiae that no one who wasn’t there could possibly care about, so I’ll cut it short. At some point, the band graciously said it was time to get back to the bus.

So of course the next morning was one of my all-time favorite hangovers.

I don’t know how many perfect moments you get. I don’t know if I’ll ever get another one. I don’t know if I’m saying that everyone should do everything in their power to meet their heroes. It’s probably still a risky endeavor. The only thing I know for sure is that I have not stopped smiling in the entire time it took me to write this. I hope I never lose that.***

** Already my favorite Santa Cruz drinking spot from my days bumming around with Clint and Vennessa and a bunch of great people from the SJSU English Department. If any of you wind up reading this ... I miss you guys. We should hang out.*

*** Did I get to hold his iPhone at one point? Oh yes I did. It was awesome. You see, I’m still a borderline-obsessive superfan, I just managed to restrain it for this one glorious night.*

**** In case anyone thinks I'm trying to rewrite history a little bit here, I'd like to acknowledge that I also wrote a long essay about having a bad time at a Hold Steady show in May. Still, the best times with the Hold Steady are absolutely worth ignoring everything else.*



9) Ellie Goulding – “I’ll Hold My Breath”

In which we longed to be told we were too young.

In which we attempted to see the whole world in a context of our choosing.

I’ve already expended quite a few words on Ellie Goulding, and I still don’t think I’ve gotten it right yet. It’s not that this song is a glimpse of a perfect world. It’s more that this song presents a world where imperfections simply don’t stick, a world where nothing leaves scars. This song was the closest we came to weightlessness in 2010.

10) The Gaslight Anthem – “The Diamond Church Street Choir”

Who, who, who does it better than we do?

If, as the critics say, the very existence of The Gaslight Anthem is an elaborate homage to Bruce Springsteen, then this one is their “Spirit in the Night.”

My favorite concert video of the year is a clip of Gaslight Anthem frontman Brian Fallon live onstage with Springsteen in England, trading verses on “No Surrender.” Go watch this video. Look at Fallon, and tell me he’s not having some kind of religious experience up there. No one in the history of the world has ever been as happy as he is in those five minutes. Incredibly, Bruce looks almost as excited. Here are two guys who play music for a living, both fully grasping just how unbelievably awesome that can be.

Pop music is often territorial, and maybe it has to be. Musically, lyrically, thematically ... everyone is working with a tiny closed universe of source material. “Derivative.” “Rip-off.” “Copycat.” These are serious insults. And so a lot of bands keep their influences at arm’s length,* acting like they invented music.**

** My biggest problem with Ilana’s new favorite band, Foxy Shazam, is their unbelievable refusal to credit Queen as an influence.*

*** Or, much more commonly, to reference only a very exclusive canon of unquestionable cool: Iggy Pop, Velvet Underground, Otis Redding. In print, no one loves Oasis or U2 or Coldplay.*

I love that Gaslight Anthem have never shied from the Springsteen comparisons, have never downplayed his influence. And I love that the Boss himself has seemingly accepted them as worthy heirs, when I’m sure someone in his inner circle must have seen Gaslight Anthem as a style-stealing threat. Both Springsteen and Fallon are confident enough in themselves to avoid any of that “There Can Only Be One!” posturing. And so we get concert footage that approaches infinite happiness. If that’s the trade-off for a subtle hit to your authenticity, I say take it.

11) Scissor Sisters – “Invisible Light”

In which we wait for the Castro to develop a culinary identity.

It’s the gay “Thriller.” If you’re not immediately excited by the sentence, “It’s the gay ‘Thriller,’” then I weep for the lack of joy in your life. Also, if we were making a list of great tension-and-release moments of 2010, the percussion that kicks in at 5:03 would be a solid bet for number one.

Finally, when your girlfriend says, “Just hypothetically, how much do you think it would cost to get Scissor Sisters to play a wedding reception? I think I would spend my whole budget on that” ... well, you need to hang onto a girl like that.

12) Rogue Wave – “Solitary Gun”

“We’ve been suffering the six days since he died ...”

The consensus seems to be that there was no justice for Oscar Grant. While I’m sure its little consolation to anyone, he sure got one near-perfect tribute song. It’s a song that

asks the question, “Shouldn’t protest songs be more heartbroken than angry?” Whether Grant was killed by a racist cop, a negligent cop, a car accident, or brain cancer, the crux of the situation is the same: he’s dead, and he left a hole in both a family and a community. Of course he’s become a symbol of so much more, but if your default emotion here is solely anger, without the requisite underlying sadness, then I guess I question your motives. I don’t question Rogue Wave’s motives at all. As Oakland residents, they don’t speak for the segment of the population who looted Foot Lockers and set cop cars on fire. They speak for that part of the community who felt an overwhelming sadness, both for the death of Oscar Grant and for the inevitable aftershocks of pain that would follow.

13) The Pains of Being Pure at Heart – “Say No to Love”

Jangly. It’s my favorite music-related adjective. If you gave me a list of songs with one-word descriptions and asked me which one I wanted to hear, I would go with the one described as “jangly.” I have little doubt I would enjoy the song I chose.

So, as one would bestow a high honor ... I think this is the jangliest song of 2010. Just close your eyes and imagine a world where the Stone Roses became the biggest band of all time.

14) Arcade Fire – “We Used to Wait”

The Suburbs is an album about nostalgia, and the interactive video for “We Used to Wait” illustrates this better than anything else. *That’s your house!*

The nostalgia of this song isn’t the usual soft-focus longing for the glory day, though. It’s almost a meditation on the impossibility of the past. The concept of the eternal present was a diabolical mind-control device in 1984, but now it’s just a matter of course. Things have always been this way. Things will always be this way. How could they ever be any different?

The narrator seems to struggle with this concept himself. We used to wait. Can you believe that? We certainly don’t wait anymore. We don’t write letters. We don’t waste hours wandering around downtown. Is it really possible that we used to wait?

The title here serves two purposes. Half the time, it sounds like the narrator is trying to talk himself into it, repeating a statement as if to make it true. For the other half, it’s a glorious inside joke that we’re all a part of. *We used to wait, you guys. Sometimes it never came. Do you remember that? Were you there? Of course you were there. We all were.*

15) Cold War Kids – “Audience”

In which it might secretly be all about Jesus.

“You need a record you can move to? Well, we’ve got one ...”

Simple drums and piano. Uncomplicated. And every time I hear it, I want to hear it again.

16) Los Campesinos! – “We’ve Got Your Back”

In which you came all the way from Wales and no one showed up.

This is, I’m pretty sure, seven Los Campesinos! songs in three years of Top 100 lists. By now, you all know how I feel about them. I will absolutely defend this band to the death. I think they have unlimited potential. If I had to pick which of my favorite bands was most likely to do something perfectly unprecedented and original, I would pick Los Campesinos! Nothing left to do but sit back and wait for them to actually do it.

17) Iron & Wine – “Walking Far From Home”

The list was done. It was *done*. I finalized it on Monday, November 29, after a weekend of tweaking and editing. I felt good about it. This single came out sometime Monday afternoon, and I thought, “Well, there’s the first song fighting for a spot on 100 Songs for 2011.” Then I listened to it. Then I listened to it again.

Then I listened to it twenty-one times on Monday. Then I literally listened to it on repeat for over an hour. I live inside this song now. There’s no other way to say it. It has become my home.

It’s my favorite yearly tradition, that one song that comes out after my Top 100 list is all but finished, that one song that demands inclusion. “Dinosaur on the Ark” by The Very Best in 2008. “Ambling Alp” by Yeasayer in 2009. And now Iron & Wine. Let’s just contemplate the lyrics while we listen to this song ten or twelve more times in a row.

*I was walking far from home
Where the names were not burned along the wall
Saw a building high as heaven
But the door was so small, door was so small*

*I saw rain clouds, little babies
And a bridge that had tumbled to the ground
I saw sinners making music
And I dreamt of that sound, dreamt of that sound*

*I was walking far from home
But I carried your letters all the while
I saw lovers in a window
Whisper “want me like time, want me like time”*

*I saw sickness bloom in fruit trees
I saw blood and a bit of it was mine
I saw children in a river
But their lips were still dry, lips were still dry*

*I was walking far from home
And I found your face mingled in the crowd
Saw a boat full of believers
Sail off talking too loud, talking too loud*

*I saw sunlight on the water
Saw a bird fall like a hammer from the sky
An old woman on the speed train
She was closing her eyes, closing her eyes*

*I saw flowers on a hillside
And a millionaire pissing on the lawn
Saw a prisoner take a pistol
And say "join me in song, join me song"*

*Saw a car crash in the country
Where the prayers run like weeds along the road
I saw strangers stealing kisses
Leaving only their clothes, only their clothes*

*Saw a white dog chase its tail
And a pair of hearts carved into a stone
I saw kindness and an angel
Crying take me back home, take me back home*

*Saw a highway, saw an ocean
I saw widows in the temple to the Lord
Naked dancers in the city
How they spoke for us all, spoke for us all*

*I saw loaded linen tables
And a motherless colt then it was gone
I saw hungry brothers waiting
With the radio on, radio on*

*I was walking far from home
Where the names were not burned along the wall
Saw a wet road form a circle
And it came like a call, came like a call from the Lord*

18) Robyn – "Hang With Me"

Pay no attention to the lyrics. That chorus is *absolutely* the soundtrack to falling recklessly, headlessly in love with someone.

19) Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin – “Sink/Let It Sway”

Here’s my story about Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin. Somewhere around 2004, maybe 2005, I stumbled across a few decent MP3s from these guys, right about the same time they were selling this debut album and this awesome t-shirt:



as a package deal for something like \$10, maybe \$12. So I bought it. And the CD, sadly, turned out to be pretty boring. So did their follow-up record a couple years later. But I kept wearing the shirt because, well ... look at it. It cannot be denied. So I had to tell people, “*Yeah, it’s a band ... they’re actually not that great, but I really love the shirt.*”

Invested as I am, it was quite a pleasant surprise when, out of nowhere, Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin released one of my five favorite albums of 2010. I mean, I already had the shirt. Now I can drop the disclaimer. “*Oh, this? Yeah, they’re a band. They’re really good.*”

20) Wolf Parade – “Little Golden Age”

I still haven’t come to terms with my college experience. Honestly, I don’t expect to anytime soon. I know I sound bitter when I talk about it, and probably I am, a little bit, but that’s not the whole story. When it was good, it was good, but when I was gone, I was glad. Maybe someday I’ll find the words. In the interim, this song is absolutely the most accurate description of college I’ve ever heard. So let’s just use this as a placeholder. You don’t ever have to visit St. Cloud, Minnesota. I don’t ever have to talk about it. It felt like this.

*You lived in a place long, long ago
Where nothing moved and time went slow
And someone sang about a Golden Age*

*In Cenetaph Park, drinking in the dark
This place was the machine that put the iron in your heart*

*So we hung around and we hung around
and we hung around for days
In the parking lot stoned, stars shone out of phase
And the rain came down, cassettes wore out, Oh No!
Then you left town feeling pretty down
With your headphones and your coat and
your dirty graduation gown you were
In the bedroom singing radio songs
Sing them loud
Sing them all night, Emily
You need something to help you along
Freeze, freeze, freeze Little Golden Age*

*I don't miss my Little Golden Age
'Cause the body takes the heart, takes the heart
around from place to place
And this place still stands, this place remains unchanged
And you can't go back
Oh, who would want to anyway*

*You were in the bedroom singing radio songs
Sing them loud
Sing them all night, Emily
You needed something to help you along
My Little Golden Age*

21) Jens Lekman – “The End of the World Is Bigger Than Love”

I could write something here, but when the artist himself has already blogged about his own song, it seems arrogant to act like I have anything to add. Take it away, Jens:

It was the day before the American election 2008 and I was filled with a hopelessness that only a McCain supporter could have shared with me at the time. I was in Washington DC to perform for Swedish TV, sitting in the couch with a professional smile on my face, joking with the hosts and discussing the lobster with the TV chef. I saw the clips online sometime ago, it's amazing what an actor I can be if I really make an effort.

I lived in America back then, up in New York. At the time I felt like everything I touched was turning to shit and I had decided to put everything on one card. Subconsciously I knew I needed to hit the bottom so I could work my way up again. I needed confirmation, I needed someone to tell me it wasn't going to work out, not this way. Yes, there was a girl involved in this. I was very much in love with her.

Some things you just go through. You don't write about it, you don't turn it into art because it can't be turned into art. I didn't write any songs that year because you can't pour manure into an espresso machine and expect a cappuccino to come out. When they announced the results and the streets filled up with people celebrating I felt happy to be part of something bigger than myself. It was a feeling that lasted me until the very last days of December 2008 when I finally sat down in my old teenage room at my parents house and I wrote this song. Then the year ended.

It's a song of hope. When love turns it's back on you it's nice to know there's a world out there that doesn't give a shit about your problems. That forces you to keep your head held high and move on. A world that is fragile and beautiful. Maybe it can sound cold to some of you, but let me make it clear that I believe in love, I just get so wrapped up in it sometimes that I need to put it into proportion. It's something you have to do a lot when you're Jens Lekman.

The title of this song "The End of the World Is Bigger Than Love" was written to me in an e-mail from my friend Maggie Macdonald. The song is based on the sentiment of these words and I owe her a lot of gratitude for letting me use them and for her support during this time in my life.

22) Free Energy – "Hope Child"

In which there was a time when we understood everything in terms of The Wire.

I am very protective of a lot of my favorite bands. Not all of them, though. I don't always feel the need to fight for the more established ones. The Hold Steady – you can pretty much say what you want about them. I understand Craig Finn's voice isn't for everyone (though Chuck's comparing them to Crash Test Dummies still seems almost purposefully nonsensical). I love them, but it's okay if you don't love them. They're all adults. They've all made fine careers of this. They're still my favorite band in the world, and I will probably tune you out if you criticize them, but that's oftentimes the only reaction you'll get from me. I am a reasonable man.

That being said, if you say one negative thing about Free Energy ... I will cut you. Don't test me. They are the nicest kids in the world, and they play these wonderful happy songs, and they give it absolutely everything they have on stage every night, and they always make time to hang out with their fans afterward, and they deserve to be huge, like Green Day or Blink-182 huge, and I think there's maybe a chance they will be, and if you stand in the way of that ... at all ... well, I can't promise that I'll be responsible for my actions.

Other bands this applies to include Los Campesinos! and Gold Motel. You've been warned.

23) Freelance Whales – "Location"

In which it's never an A or B choice.

If it were possible to wrap yourself in a song, really snuggle in there, envelope yourself in the soft, comforting texture of it ... if I could do that with one song released in 2010, I would choose this one.

I'm not even mad that I missed the best college basketball game of the year (Kansas State – Xavier, Sweet Sixteen, double overtime with Gus Johnson on the call) to see these guys at Bottom of the Hill. I would do it again in a second.

24) Belle & Sebastian – “I Didn’t See It Coming”

All I want is for my favorite bands to come to San Francisco, headline our music festivals, and tell stories onstage about their adventures on the J-Church. If Belle & Sebastian can do it, I don't know what's stopping the rest of you.

Also, if there's even one percent truth to the rumor that Stuart Murdoch wants to play a B&S show in Dolores Park ... well, if you need more than that to be happy, you're just being greedy.

25) The Hold Steady – “Hurricane J”

In which no one protected me from the crazy.

I have written just a huge amount of words about the Hold Steady. A crushing amount of words. Maybe you remember the thousand words just a couple pages ago. Or you can follow that link right above this paragraph for another thousand words. Or track down one of my countless other blog posts about the band.

This, right here, is overkill. I know that. But I have a captive audience right now, so I'm going for it anyway. This is an essay I wrote for Elliot's sadly-defunct blog. I don't think it's online anywhere else, and I'd like you to have it. If it's too much to read right now, well, there's a reference to Cold War aeronautics in the next blurb. Maybe pick it up again down there.

Seventeen and Stuck Up / Up in Osseo: The Hold Steady and the Validity of Individual Experience

I grew up in a small town in Southeastern Minnesota. While I have since moved to San Francisco, I still consider myself a Minnesotan, and I probably always will. The rural Midwest defines me. For this reason, I spent the majority of my formative years feeling culturally insignificant. However, for this same reason, I love The Hold Steady more than just about anything in the world. Let me explain.

Those of us raised in the flyover states know, deep down, that our lives are not nearly as meaningful as those of our peers on the Coast. We grow up lacking a kind of

metaphorical substance. No one writes songs about us, and deep down we know it's because we do not have lives worthy of pop music immortality.

I spent my high school years playing sports, listening to music, drinking in basements, and unsuccessfully pursuing girls. This, I have to imagine is exactly how teenage males spend their time in New York City, Los Angeles, or any other major American city. I'm told that Californians don't have basements, but really this seems like a minor issue. The fact of the matter is that I shared the same experiences with most everybody my age, and yet I knew deep down that my life was fundamentally different than those of the City kids, that if I could trade places with them, I would crash and burn immediately. I knew that any happiness I could acquire was a direct consequence of inhabiting a very small pond. For this, as with all the problems in my life, I blame pop music.

Here's a fun exercise: Name ten songs with the word "California" in the title. I'm not kidding ... do it. It takes about thirty seconds. New York is just as easy. These are cultural touchstones, and it's not surprising that songwriters rely on the imagery and emotion that come with them. It's easy to attach significance to any coastal metropolis. If you live in New York City, some indie band has penned an ode to your borough, some up-and-coming rapper has given a shout-out to your block. I don't have the facts to back this up, but I would bet there is a song about every major highway in Southern California. And so, as a confused teenager in the City, you can listen to music about things you see and do every day, and you can relate on a very intimate level, and you can know that the emotions you feel are just as real as Lou Reed's, or Tupac Shakur's, or whoever your icons may be. You can be reassured that life is hard, but that there is meaning in the struggle, because your heroes came from the exact same place, and they made something beautiful out of your surroundings. This has to be about the most hopeful thing ever.

Kids from the rural Midwest, however, listen to those same songs, and we feel the same loneliness, or isolation, or even joy, but we wonder if those emotions are somehow different in the City, we wonder if our loneliness is as gripping as theirs, we wonder if they feel joy on a much larger scale, if we're just pretenders to some larger human truth. It's like breaking your wrist falling out of a tree house, then showing up at school the next day and hearing about the mountain climber who had to amputate his own arm. You thought you knew pain, you thought you had the toughness to overcome anything, but then you realized that maybe there was this whole other world of pain that would probably break you, and you realized there were people who could likely endure your sufferings without even flinching. Life in the rural Midwest is like that.

And so we go through our lives without songs about us. Bands from the Midwest just don't operate the same way as bands from the Coasts, which is interesting because there are so many seminal acts from the forgotten states. The Twin Cities alone can claim everyone from Price to the Replacements. And yet these bands always seem to strive for a larger kind of universality, one lacking the relevant details of acts from other geographic regions. For instance, the alternative music scene in Minneapolis rivaled any in America in the early 1990s, but these bands didn't want to talk about Interstate 94, or the bars in Uptown, or how it felt when the Twins won the 1991 World Series. Listening to Paul

Westerberg sing about getting drunk, you can guess at which bars he frequented, but he never relies on that specific information, and so, really, a burned-out college student at the University of Minnesota has no more claim to “I’ll Be You” than anyone else anywhere. It’s great music, and it resonates, but bands do not belong to the Midwest in the same way that Green Day belongs to the East Bay or The Strokes belong to New York. The music often plays like it’s hiding its heritage, like the bands are scared no one wants to listen to songs made in the Central Time Zone.

I had already moved out to California by the time I discovered The Hold Steady (and, also, lead singer Craig Finn’s previous and very similar band, Lifter Puller). Fantastic though it may sound, I don’t think it would be hyperbole to say that if I had listened to The Hold Steady in high school, there’s a good chance I would be living in Minneapolis right now. The band is that important to me. They make Minnesota real. They make Minneapolis significant. They carve out a pop cultural niche for all of us who love the Golden Gophers but hate all those drawn out winters.

There is a whole world in the details of a Hold Steady song. For anyone who ever walked across the Grain Belt bridge, or even shopped at a Rainbow Foods, Finn’s lyrics are a revelation, forceful and sung with a hint of a sneer. He doesn’t care if hipsters in Greenwich Village or scenesters on Rodeo Drive are turned off by obscure references to suburban Minneapolis or parties on the banks of the Mississippi River. He doesn’t care because these things happened TO HIM, and therefore they are important TO HIM, and so he’s going to sing about them because we all have random experiences seared into our memories, and if we ever want to engage each other on a meaningful level, we must realize that meaning and significance are almost always subjective, and if you think that the only things that matter are things that happen on the Coasts, well, Craig Finn does not care what you think. He is not writing songs for you. He is writing songs for him. And, by doing so, he is writing songs for me.

The music is not a celebration of Minnesota, but it IS a declaration of Midwestern significance. Finn is not writing jingles for the board of tourism. These are songs about drug overdoses and fights and even suicide. These are not songs to make you love Minneapolis. However, in the same way that Bruce Springsteen expressed his feelings about New Jersey through characters who wanted nothing more than to leave, Finn creates a world that is definitely not paradise, but is definitely home. Though the band has relocated to New York City, they still write songs about Bloomington, Minnesota (home of the Mall of America!). Why not substitute Brooklyn instead? Because life is just as real anywhere. Broadway and Lyndale are both just roads. I didn’t always know that. Craig Finn did. This is why his band matters.

26) Wolf Parade – “Yulia”

In which things just get more and more likely until they become inevitable.

As I compiled this list, Wolf Parade announced they would be going on hiatus for at least a year. Well, that’s all well and good, guys, but who will write heartbreaking rock songs

about doomed Russian cosmonauts now? Did you just think someone would step in and fill the void?

(Looks around.)

Does anyone want to start a 1960s space-race band with me?

27) Foxy Shazam – “Count Me Out”

Before we get to the main topic here, I’d just like to point out that this song, both in terms of lyrical phrasing and overall theme, is pretty much a double-time version of TLC’s “Waterfalls.” I approve of that.

More importantly, though ... this was Ilana’s great musical epiphany of 2010. We saw these guys open for Free Energy at the Blank Club in San Jose. We showed up about halfway through their set, walked in while the lead singer was in the middle of a long, storefront-church preacher-style rant that ended with him screaming, “LADY ... I’M FROM UNDER MY HAT!!!” From there, it got weirder. The keyboardist played while standing on his head and clapping his feet to the beat. The lead singer lit a cigarette, took one drag ... then proceeded to *eat the entire lit cigarette*. He later offered a very sincere pre-apology before destroying a bunch of equipment. They did their last song acapella.

Before they were even off the stage, Ilana was at the merch table. Before I even knew she was gone, she had returned with a copy of their self-titled major label debut. In short, she acted exactly like I act about fifteen times a year, head over heels for some new musical discovery. And I don’t want this to sound patronizing, like “*Oh, look, someone else likes a band. Isn’t that just the cutest thing ever?*” Because I thought they were pretty great, too. I’m not telling a story about Ilana’s reaction because loving Foxy Shazam is somehow beneath me. I’m telling it because it is so incredibly life-affirming to watch someone unexpectedly fall in love with something completely random, be it a band or a song or even, I don’t know, a food. I would watch a new epiphany every day if I could.

28) The Hoosiers – “Choices”

In trademark law, there is a class of marks known as “geographically misdescriptive.” It’s a confusing area of the law, because some of these marks are legal and some aren’t, but the concept at the core of it is that there can be a benefit in associating your product with a place even if said product doesn’t actually originate there. You would want to label your produce line “California Gold” even if it were grown somewhere in South America.

And I understand this fascination with place names in the abstract. Growing up in rural Minnesota, it seemed like every Californian dot on the map had strong undertones of paradise. Santa Cruz. Big Sur. Santa Monica. Malibu. These were more than places. They were clothing companies, books, songs, terrible liqueurs. Every location evocative

of a feeling, but a feeling that seemingly didn't need a geographical reality to exist. After I moved here, it was a constantly surreal experience to actually see these places, especially when some (like clothing-company namesake Hollister) were anything but idyllic.

I say this because The Hoosiers are from England. Now, I have never thought of Indiana as being in any way cool. In fact, I would consider Indiana to be one of our least cool states. And yet, I would bet there are teenagers all over England for who the idea of Hoosiers (and the Hoosier state) has transcended all real-world meaning, become a purely imaginary construct where the streets are paved with impossibly catchy pop songs.

Language is weird.

29) Broken Bells – “The High Road”

Broken Bells were everywhere in 2010, and I'm sure you all know “The High Road” by heart at this point. So here's a tangential question:

Broken Bells is hip hop producer Danger Mouse and James Mercer, former lead singer of The Shins.

Here's a short resume for Danger Mouse:

- produced a bunch of really good underground hip hop, most notably *Ghetto Pop Life* with rapper Jemini
- basically invented the mash-up with his Beatles-vs.-Jay-Z-themed *The Grey Album*, people who don't actually like music start calling him a genius
- along with Cee-Lo, formed Gnarls Barkley, wrote “Crazy,” probably one of the ten biggest pop songs of the decade
- produced albums for Beck, Gorillaz, and others
- is producing the new U2 album

Here's a short resume for Mercer:

- wrote three critically-acclaimed indie pop albums
- wrote one single that actually made the Hot 100 pop chart (“Phantom Limb,” landed somewhere in the 80s)
- basically invented the genre of music that exists to be played in the background of TV shows and movies
- took over the world after “This band will change your life” scene from *Garden State*
- have, seriously, been on the soundtrack albums for NINE movies/TV shows
- became pretty much the first indie band to sell serious amounts of records, with two certified gold albums and a #2 chart debut for *Winning the Night Away*, all without much of anything in the way of promotion or radio play (with the exception of “New Slang” (the *Garden State* song) several years after its original release)

If you're walking into a pitch meeting with a record label, and you're trying to sell them on the idea of this Broken Bells collaboration ... whose name do you say first?

30) Drive By Truckers – “Birthday Boy”

In which we wondered if pretty girls from the smallest towns really do get remembered like storms and droughts (Curt says, “Yes!”)

In which we stood at the back of the Fillmore and debated the virtues of DBT frontmen (Brett and Meg say, “Patterson!”)

An irrefutable counterpoint to those who say they don’t make rock bands like they used to. A drunken, disorganized, wildly-careening live show. One of the very few bands on my “Never, NEVER Miss Them If They Come to Town” list.*

If I was making you a music-related bucket list** (and I will, gladly), “See Drive By Truckers perform an extended live version of “Let There Be Rock” would be near the top of that list.

** Hold Steady, Mountain Goats, Los Campesinos!, Drive By Truckers, Scissor Sisters, The Very Best, Architecture in Helsinki, and maybe TV on the Radio.*

*** Did this phrase originate with the movie? It couldn’t have, right? And yet I don’t remember ever hearing it before the movie.*

31) Japandroids – “Younger Us”

In which the lead singer looks like a college-age Ted Mosby.

If Japandroids stand for anything, it is youth. Not idealized, fresh-faced, world-beating youth, but clock-is-ticking, slipping-through-your-fingers youth. On 2009’s “Young Hearts Spark Fire,” they sang, “We used to dream / Now we worry about dying. Here the sentiment is even further stripped bare, “Give me younger us.” The guitars scream to live in the now, to seize the present moment forever, while the lyrics caustically remind you that “now” is, by definition, always eternally gone.

For me, it’s the sound of walking alone through the Mission at night, half-drunk, in the rain, trying to convince yourself that life hasn’t passed you by.

There’s a line in High Fidelity* where John Cusack’s character says, “Only people of a certain disposition are frightened of being alone for the rest of their lives at the age of 26, and we were of that disposition.” If I add a sentence here poking fun at Japandroids (two guys who are almost the definition of youthful energy and intensity) worrying about the loss of their youth, I also have to add that I understand it’s almost as ridiculous for me to feel the same way. I still feel like that, though.

** My all-time favorite movie and one of my very favorite books, and I know it probably shocks many of you that I can relate to a guy who spends his whole life making music lists.*

32) Gold Motel – “Safe In L.A.”

I hate laugh tracks. I think everyone hates laugh tracks. They’re distracting and usually unnecessary and above-all condescending, like we need cues to understand all this brilliant humor unfolding before us. Chuck Klosterman has written an essay about it, so I don’t think it’s necessary for me to add much more. Laugh tracks are stupid.

And yet, I tend to like fake audience noise on studio recordings. This song ends in staged applause, and I have no problem with it. In fact, I kinda like it. Same for Sufjan Stevens’ “Decatur” or MGMT’s “Congratulations.”

So why is this different than the laugh track? Isn’t it the band saying, “Yes, your suspicions are correct. This song is very good. You should be showing your appreciation for it”?

33) Band of Horses – “Compliments”

In which we dream of moving to a small town in South Carolina and devoting our lives to writing the perfect alt-country song.

Democrats pretty constantly accuse Republicans of romanticizing a past that never existed, and of dragging us all backward toward that misplaced fantasy, and this is probably accurate, but, to some degree, we all do that kind of romanticizing from time to time.* Most of us aren’t foolish enough to devote our lives to it, but it’s a fun escape for the length of a movie, or an album, or even just a song.

Band of Horses are playing with that kind of emotion here. It’s all lazy small-town charm, drinking in the morning and log cabins and the reverb-drenched approach of a yellow dog. It sounds so perfectly relaxing, the opposite of work and city life and real-world responsibilities. Do I want that life for more than the 3:27 of this song? Probably not. But it’s a great escape while it lasts.

(Also, “I bet you get a lot of compliments down there” gets my vote for “Lyric of the Year that Sounds Obscene But Really Isn’t.”)

** I think this instinct was the driving force behind the initial popularity of Mad Men. The narrative for the first season was basically, “Wouldn’t it be so cool to be Don Draper or Roger Sterling and live in the 1960s and drink at work and smoke cigarettes and speak in short, forceful sentences and witty quips and be almost-unbelievably handsome and have a bunch of affairs and not have to worry about all our stupid modern-day problems?” The critics are over it now, but most of the original Mad Men backlash came in the form of people overcompensating for that first instinct, saying, “Oh, you think the 1960s were*

so awesome, when minorities and women had no rights and gay people were living horrible secret lives and secretaries had no choice but to have sex with their bosses and then get back-alley abortions and white men ruled the world?” And ... of course that’s not it, no one wants that, and the more anyone thinks about it, the more I don’t think anyone really wishes it were still the 1960s. We just wanted to romanticize that image of the super-cool ad man for an hour a week. And, in my opinion, the best thing the show has done over the following seasons was to distance itself from that instinct, to the point where probably no one wants to be Don or Roger anymore, but we still want to watch them. Man that show is good.

34) Woods – “Suffering Season”

“Who knows what tomorrow might bring?”

It’s the song I most often found myself involuntarily singing out loud walking down the hall at work. It’s a weird kind of catchy, but man does it take up residence in my head sometimes.

As Pitchfork put it: *“I won’t say that this is the best song Woods have written, but it is the one I feel like I could ask anyone I know to check out, the song that says, ‘Here’s a band you might like.’”*

That could be the mission statement for this whole 100 Songs project.

35) LCD Soundsystem – “Dance Yrself Clean”

I spent a large part of 2010 trying to understand trying to understand the science of sound recording, why music sounds the way it does. I still wholeheartedly recommend *Perfecting Sound Forever* by Greg Milner. Even after learning as much as I could, though I can’t say I really understand that much about gated drums or dynamic range compression or anything like that. In high school, my band hung a directional mic from a ceiling fan, then just played the same song over and over until we got a good take. That’s about as far as I got in terms of recording technology.

Still, I like knowing that there is a whole world of technical considerations that go into the creation of a song. I like reading interviews where very smart people say things like, *“from what I’ve read about James Murphy [the man behind LCD Soundsystem]’s views on sound, I wouldn’t be surprised if the songs were mastered with vinyl in mind.”* That might as well say “mastered with unicorns in mind” for all I understand it, but I like being able to approach music on multiple levels of depth. I can tell you this song sounds good. It makes me happy to know there are people out there who can tell you exactly *why*.

36) The National – “Bloodbuzz Ohio”

In which we capture the intensity.

High Violet was almost universally loved this year, but for some reason it missed me. It's not quite as simple as saying, "It's too sad," because I still listen to sad music, and I don't think I'm somehow too constantly happy to relate to a band like The National. That's not it at all. It's more than I really don't relate to their specific brand of depression. The songs all seem to come from a very claustrophobic place, hemmed in by the city, trapped by almost everything ... and I just don't think that's one of my issues. Sorry. "Bloodbuzz Ohio" is a great, though, full of wonderful little moments when all that weight lifts.

37) The Gaslight Anthem – "The Queen of Lower Chelsea"

Here's an attempt to explain just how captivating Gaslight Anthem is as a live band. This summer, a bunch of us trekked down to San Jose to see them play a free show as part of the annual "Music in the Park" series. As with any trip to San Jose for any reason, I mostly talked people into coming along with a promise of delicious Mexican food from La Victoria Taqueria, home of the World Famous Orange Sauce. If I had to pick a last meal, this might be it. It's that good. So we made plans to grab burritos after the show.

I worked at Music in the Park for the two years I lived in San Jose, and I was pretty sure nobody played encores. So we all danced and sang along through an enjoyable Gaslight Anthem set, then, when the band left the stage, we started making our way toward La Vic's. People were excited. I can admit that at least a few people in our group were there for the Orange Sauce first, and the concert second.

Then, unexpectedly, the band came out for an encore. And then they played a second song. And then a third. And the encore stretched on and on.

I'd like to tell you that we stayed until the very end, that we put our burrito dreams aside for as long as was necessary to fully enjoy the show. If we're being honest, though ... we didn't quite make it all the way through the encore. But we made it *most* of the way through the encore. And, if you don't think that's an incredibly high compliment, then you've never been to La Victoria. If I was in Gaslight Anthem, I'd put this up in bold letters on the band's official website.

Gaslight Anthem: A bunch of people put off getting La Victoria burritos (with Orange Sauce) for like twenty minutes longer than expected because our live show is so good.

38) The Pains of Being Pure at Heart – "Heart in Your Heartbreak"

If I had one piece of advice for all the adorable little indie twee bands out there, it would be this: SELL OUT!

I know people were up in arms about the fact that Pains of Being Pure at Heart are now working with a producer whose credits include U2 and Smashing Pumpkins, but honestly ... where else were they going to go? Their lo-fi debut album was brilliant, of course, but

by the end of it they were already recycling elements. No one wanted them to make the same album over and over again for their entire career.

So they took a chance, filled out their sound, and the results are undeniable. Selling out as the artistically-responsible thing to do ... we are through the looking glass here, people.

39) Decemberists – “Down By The Water”

Gillian Welch is my generation’s Emmylou Harris, which is to say that, if she’s singing backing vocals on your song, it is *by definition* a good song.

40) Delays – “Unsung”

You just don’t find un-ironic falsetto very often in the indie rock world. Cherish it when you do. For me, the Delays are one of a very small number of bands that don’t really *signify* anything. As far as I’m concerned, this song is completely unconnected to anything else in the world. They exist in a vacuum, and as a result listening to them is a very clean, unencumbered experience.*

** Note: If it turns out these guys are all ironic-post-something or a performance- art commentary on the inherent contradictions of something else, or a conceptual ... thing ... please just don’t tell me.*

41) Gorillaz – “Superfast Jellyfish” (f/ Gruff Rhys and De La Soul)

In which you should listen to it again right now.

Absolutely as innovative, catchy, silly, and weird as you would expect a collaboration between these three bands to be.

42) Hanson – “Thinking ‘Bout Somethin’”

So ... Hanson.

It’s always been one of my favorite devil’s-advocate arguments that Hanson is, and has always been, a good band. I have no problem with “MMMBop.” I think their second album would have been a huge success had it been recorded by anyone else. “If Only” has been on basically every party or running mix I’ve made in the last five years.

So this is their new single. I challenge anyone to explain to me how it is anything but completely wonderful.

JD said this is the kind of song that would play over the closing credits of a Disney movie starring a talking animal, and I have to admit that he’s probably not too far off on that one. If I may retort: *Yeah, but still ...*

43) Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin – “Back in the Saddle”

Piggybacking off of the Hanson comment above, this song will be playing over the opening credits to my coming-of-age road trip comedy. But it’s one of those *Little Miss Sunshine*/Wes Anderson-type comedies that’s actually really sad most of the time.

44) Arcade Fire – “Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains)”

Finally, a “Heart of Glass” for my generation! Runaway winner of this year’s award for Single That Sounds Absolutely Nothing Like The Rest Of The Album. I know the band is a cultural phenomenon at this point, so it probably isn’t really a concern, but what if this was the first Arcade Fire song someone heard? That person would be in for a surprise.

45) The Thermals – “I Don’t Believe You”

A smoother sound on this album, not so much a mellowing as a sublimation of an intensity that’s still there. The Thermals career path seems to be in line with that of TV on the Radio, from ragged brilliance (*More Parts Per Million*) to fully realized genius (*The Body, The Blood, The Machine*) to a more classic-sounding polish (*Personal Life*). This is how punks age gracefully.

46) Superchunk – “Digging for Something”

There’s discovering a band right at the beginning of their career arc, following them all the way through to the end. Then there’s discovering a band when they first break through into the mainstream. Then there’s basically ignoring a band while they were critically and culturally relevant, living most of your life largely unaware of their existence, only to stumble across their reunion album more than twenty years after their breakthrough hit. That last one is me with Superchunk. “Slack Motherf***er” made then alt-rock stars in 1989, and I’m just discovering them now. I am the least authentic Superchunk fan on the planet.

47) Mates of State – “Long Way Home”

It’s hard to get excited about a covers album. It’s so rare that a band really does a cover version right, really makes it their own. And, on *Crushes*, Mates of State occasionally fall into the trap of just faithfully reproducing an already-great song (like their carbon-copy take on the Belle & Sebastian classic “Sleep the Clock Around”). On “Long Way Home,” though, they stamp their unique identity all over it. Originally written by Tom Waits, recently covered by Norah Jones, this version is absolutely a Mates of State song, with a couple of their signature moments of overflowing exuberance: the horns behind the “hat full of rain” line at around 1:15, and the drum buildup to “Watch your BACK if I should tell” at 1:55.

48) Matt & Kim – “Cameras”

Probably more swagger than two pale, skinny hipsters from Brooklyn are allowed to possess.

49) Ra Ra Riot – “Boy”

For me, the sound of walking through the gates at a rain-drenched Treasure Island Music Festival, wrapping myself in a plastic garbage bag and hoping for the best. It is the sounds of the rains letting up. It is the sound of optimism winning out.

Even apart from my positive memories associated with it, though, this song grew on me more than almost any other this year. For most of the songs on this list, I fell in love almost instantly. This one took some time to win me over, and I think that’s a good sign for the longevity of my relationship with it. I’m sure there will be some songs on this list that I get sick of. I don’t think “Boy” will be one of them.

50) Sambassadeur – “Stranded”

Is there anything better than Swedish album-release propaganda? Exhibit A:

Their third album “European”, which is due to be released February 23rd 2010, has taken almost two years to finish and they’ve once again employed the talents of Mattias Glavå, who produced “Migration”. According to the band he did very little. He merely lay on the sofa and cursed how badly they played their instruments and continued to bring in more and more musicians. A string quartet, three drummers, a saxophone player, clarinet, the list goes on...

This is said to be the extrovert album from Sambassadeur. They’ve finally accomplished making the grand, classic and orchestrated album they’ve always wanted to. So don’t miss it for the world!

You will also be able to catch Sambassadeur live in various places during 2010. Don’t hold your hopes too high on them going too far away from Sweden though. The guitarist Joachim Läckberg suffers from severe flying anxiety and has to take the train!

51) Sleigh Bells – “Ring Ring (Demo Version)”

This year’s unfortunate recipient of the Black Kids Memorial “Disease of Over-Production” Award. I used to think “overproduced” was one of the most pretentious-sounding critical attacks on a band: *“Oh, you don’t like this because it sounds too good, is that it? Would you rather they recorded it by singing into a tin can on a string? Sorry someone actually spent money on the album.”*

But ... this is the demo version of this song. I’ll post the album version on the blog. Honestly ... tell me which one you like better.

52) Teddybears – “Crystal Meth Christian” (f/ Flaming Lips)

Swedish weird (Teddybears) cross-pollinates with American weird (Flaming Lips) to create super-strain of weird that will eventually come to rule the world.

53) Sun Airway – “Waiting on You”

Nocturne of Exploded Crystal Chandelier is an album dedicated to Kurt Vonnegut, JD Salinger, and David Foster Wallace ... and it *sounds* like an album dedicated to Kurt Vonnegut, JD Salinger, and David Foster Wallace. It's an incredibly literate record, a soundscape that fits with a lifetime spent wrapped up in books. This is absolutely my favorite song of the collection, but it's a remarkably consistent album, and the two Sun Airway songs on this list could arguably be replaced with about a half dozen others.

54) Foxy Shazam – “Killin’ It”

You know that scene in Old School where the guys drive around in that panel van, wearing ski masks, and kidnap all the potential pledges for their fraternity? Well, someday, Foxy Shazam is going to return to the Bay Area. And Ilana is going to ask you to come to the show. Then Ilana is going to demand that you come to the show. Then, if necessary, Ilana may tackle you into a fountain. Don't fight it. It's useless. You are going to wind up in that van.

55) Titus Andronicus – “A More Perfect Union”

In which Titus Andronicus would like to crash on your couch.

We all judge NASCAR fans for going to races hoping to see a fiery crash, but I have to admit feeling a little bit of a thrill at watching musicians freak out onstage. During a late-March Titus Andronicus show at Slim's, a dispute over sound levels somehow led to lead singer Patrick Stickles launch into an extended discussion of his anti-depressant usage. It was exactly as uncomfortably surreal as you'd expect.

It's not that I took any pleasure in seeing Stickles upset, but I do enjoy seeing glimpses of how much music truly *means* to my favorite artists. This should be more than a job to them. It should bleed into their lives. I don't want to see them tortured, but I do want to see them consumed. I want to see flashes of pure authenticity. And I got that from Titus Andronicus. They probably left that show thinking it had been a complete disaster. But I liked them better after seeing it.

56) New Pornographers – “Moves”

As I was sitting here, trying to think of something appropriate to say about this wonderful song, I see that my friend Gene has posted his five favorite songs of the year on Facebook. They are:

- 1 – MGMT – “Flash Delirium”
- 2 – New Pornographers – “Moves”
- 3 – Ra Ra Riot – “Boy”
- 4 – Band of Horses – “Compliments”
- 5 – Secret Cities – “Boyfriends”

So, take it from him. This is a really good song. Right now, I would bet we’re both thinking of one night in July at the Fox Theater when the New Pornographers were fighting with a terribly muddy sound. Only the low end was coming through, and, for all their positive traits, “trunk-rattling bass” isn’t a compliment normally associated with them at all. Except for this song, which cut through all the technical shortcomings and was the absolute highlight of that set.

Two more thoughts about Gene’s Top Five:

- One – It makes me feel better about my list that four of his top five wound up somewhere in my Top 100. The fifth, the Secret Cities tune, is pretty solid in its own right, but I really have a hard time with most songs featuring whistling. I’ll put it up on the blog and you can judge for yourself.
- Two – I *love* the New Pornographers. For almost a decade now, they’ve been among my 3-5 favorite bands. Sadly, that pales in comparison to Gene’s devotion to the band. He’s seen them something like a dozen times, has followed them on tour, etc. So, despite my professed long-time love for the band, I am nowhere near the biggest New Pornographers fan at my office. In the same way, a lot of you know me as a moderately-obsessive marathon runner. And I used to be pretty fast. I’m proud of that 3:10:56 in LA two years ago. I’m proud of running Boston in 2009. But I work with a guy who finished *forty-second and fifty-first overall* in back to back Boston Marathons.* I guess I’m lucky that I’m still the biggest Twins fan in the office. Still have that going for me ...

* *Not to toot my own horn, but I was 5829th in 2009, so ... yeah.*

57) Gold Motel – “Perfect (In My Mind)”

There are so many things I love about my current Hancock Street apartment, but one of the very best is that I live within walking distance of an excellent little music venue, Café du Nord on Market Street between Church and Sanchez. Now, I love the shows you mark on your calendar months in advance.* I love concerts that are *events*. On the other hand, I also saying, “*Hey, Gold Motel is the second band on tonight. Wanna wander over there and check it out?*” Because a good show is a good show, but an unexpected, last minute good show is somehow better than anything. I’d like to become a regular at Café du Nord. I’d like to know the guy at the door by name. And, since I’m ostensibly going there to see bands, it would come with none of the shame normally associated with being way too familiar with the staff at a bar.

** Lykke Li is playing the Regency Grand Ballroom May 30. She announced this tour in mid-November. That might be too much buildup.*

58) Scissor Sisters – “Skin Tight”

I’m going out on a limb here and calling this my all-time favorite song about condoms. I know, it’s a bold statement.

59) Cut Copy – “Where I’m Going”

Of the two new Cut Copy singles released in the second half of 2010, this is the one it’s cool to like, because this one sounds like the Beach Boys and The Beatles and early Pink Floyd. As you’ll see later on the list, Cut Copy does not always limit themselves to universally-respected influences.

60) Jeremy Messersmith – “Violet!”

Minneapolis singer-songwriter crafts the year’s best forgotten 1960s TV show theme. Starring Mary Tyler Moore as *Violet!*

Messersmith has a whole collection of sharp, catchy songs, and it’s really just a failure of marketing that he’s not already a blog-rock celebrity. If he just started a band with a cutesy/clever name and just put out the same records, it seems like he would own the Shins/Death Cab for Cutie market.

61) Jenny and Johnny – “Big Wave”

I’m limiting myself to two block quotes from Fluxblog in these write-ups because, really, I’m not going to become as insightful a music writer as that guy just by copying and pasting everything he does. This one, though ... this one is perfect:

“Big Wave” sounds like it should be uncomplicated and carefree, a summer fun song about surfing or whatever. Instead, it’s about debt and financial recklessness, with Jenny Lewis singing about bankruptcy and loans in the same wounded sweetheart tone she reserved for up tempo Rilo Kiley tunes like “Portions For Foxes” and “It’s A Hit.” It’s not the most mind-blowing irony you’re going to find, but it works, and the breezy, “hey, who cares, everything is gonna be fine” tone of the music is an appropriate sound for a topic that a lot of people try not to think too hard about at their own expense. What makes the song really work is that it’s very much about the emotional toll of economic distress, and Lewis’ voice hits just the right note of sadness and wounded pride throughout the track, but most especially during the bridge up to the chorus. She doesn’t go too far with it, but she gets across enough to suggest that she’s only skimming the surface of the “big wave” of sorrow, confusion, and regret coming her way.

62) Kanye West – “See Me Now” (f/ Beyonce and Charlie Wilson)

Proof that I don't really get hip hop anymore, if I ever did. Released as part of Kanye's free-music G.O.O.D. Friday series, "See Me Now" was met with almost universal derision from the internet hip hop community. Months later, it didn't even make the cut for *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, which, if you haven't heard, is the music blogosphere's newest nominee for Greatest Album of All Time. All of this just mystifies me, as this was pretty easily my favorite hip hop song of the year. Then again, I don't really want Kanye to innovate. I just want him to keep making "Gone" over and over again. I went soul loops and slow-moving bass lines and swagger and Charlie Wilson on *everything*.

Though I admit it *is* somewhat off-putting to hear Beyonce say the n-word.

Also, I'd like someone to write a book about the nature of American celebrity in the twenty-first century and call it *Like a Mix Between Fergie and Jesus*. That line has just an impossible number of layers to unpack.

63) Robyn – "Cry When You Get Older"

"Back in suburbia kids get high and make out on the train ..."

It's always fun to imagine every Robyn song as an obscure Prince cover, but this one is probably the Prince-iest of them all. Androgynous sexuality, undeniable danceability, and songs that dig into the underlying sadness exactly as deep as you need them to. Sweden is the new Paisley Park.

64) Caribou – "Odessa"

In which we didn't even have to rob and drug dealers.

One review I read called this the perfect soundtrack for the sun melting snow. That is absolutely right.

65) Topher Mohr – "Ruthless"

Finally, someone wrote that missing link song between Cheryl Lynn's "Got to Be Real" and Steely Dan's "Kid Charlemagne." And, like "Kid Charlemagne," this one combines largely despondent lyrics with some of the most euphoric guitar work imaginable. Musically, this one deserves a spot in any wedding reception playlist, couples on the floor singing to each other. Lyrically, though ... *"I loved you more than him / I loved you more than you'll ever get to find out ..."*

Mohr is the guitarist in Mayer Hawthorne's band, and I first learned of this song when Mayer gave up the spotlight for one song during the band's recent show at Bimbo's. So I feel a little weird ranking it above any of Mayer's songs from the last year. I hope it doesn't cause any tension between the guys.

66) The Thermals – “Never Listen to Me”

Chris Walla plays guitar in Death Cab for Cutie, but, over the last five years or so, he’s mostly worked as a producer. Here’s his resume over that time:

2010 – Ra Ra Riot, Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin, The Thermals
2009 – Tegan and Sara
2008 – Mates of State, Nada Surf
2006 – Decemberists

And, before that, he worked on multiple other albums for Tegan and Sara, Decemberists, and The Thermals. He also produced the Postal Service album.

So I don’t know what he actually does behind the boards, but wow ... Chris Walla is absolutely producing my album.

67) Two Door Cinema Club – “Something Good Can Work”

In which I own two Avril Lavigne albums.

From the “History” section of Two Door Cinema Club’s Wikipedia entry: *“Trimble and Halliday first met whilst attending Bangor Grammar School. They met Baird when he was trying to ‘get with’ girls they knew.”*

That’s pretty much the story of every band in the history of the world, isn’t it?

68) Tokyo Police Club – “Bambi”

A song that sounds like it was made not by playing instruments but by flipping a series of switches.

69) Foster the People – “Pumped Up Kicks”

In which Joe Posnanski is the best writer of our time.

I’ve done a pretty exhaustive search, and I’m pretty sure this is the only Foster the People song that exists in recorded form. It may be the only song they have. And yet, they play shows. Those shows may be very short.

If this one is their only song, though, they’re definitely batting 1.000 so far. It’s almost impossibly light and summery, even though the lyrics appear to be about shooting kids for their shoes. So it goes, I guess.

70) Chromeo – “Don’t Turn the Lights On”

From Wikipedia: *Chromeo is an electrofunk duo based in Montreal, Canada composed of P-Thugg (real name Patrick Gemayel) on keyboards, synthesizers, and talk box, and Dave 1 (real name David Macklovitch) on guitar and lead vocals. The two childhood friends jokingly describe themselves as “the only successful Arab/Jewish partnership since the dawn of human culture.” Their second album Fancy Footwork is their mainstream breakthrough.*

I think that pretty well covers it.

71) Tallest Man on Earth – “King of Spain”

“I am a native of the North Pole, and that could mess up any kid.”

By a probably-unanimous vote, this was the most-hated song I blogged about in 2010. If you remember, in response to my original “King of Spain” post, Curt said “You’ve lost all credibility. This song is horrible. It’s so bad it makes me want to unfriend you on Facebook.” When it came in at number 42 on my Halfway Point 100, Jerry said “I really want to punch that guy in the face and I don’t know why.”

So, here it is again. I promise I’m not just doing this to be spiteful. I really do like this song quite a bit. But I guess I’ve given up talking anybody else into it at this point. I’ll post a couple more Tallest Man on Earth songs on the blog. Maybe we’ll have better luck with those. Or maybe they’ll drive Curt to finally follow through on his unfriending threats.

72) Mayer Hawthorne – “No Strings”

On the ever-growing list of “Songs Inexcusably Left Off Of Aaron’s 100 Songs for 2009,” Mayer Hawthorne’s “Your Easy Lovin’ Ain’t Pleasin’ Nothin’” would have to be near the top. 2010’s “No Strings” isn’t quite as impossibly brilliant as that one, but it does highlight the man’s undeniable versatility. 2009 full-length *A Strange Arrangement* was all Motown, but Mayer’s live show features everything from yacht rock (a cover of Michael McDonald’s “What a Fool Believes”) to early-2000s hip hop (an extended jam on Snoop Dogg’s “Beautiful”). This one, somehow, comes off as early-90s R&B, like an update on “Ain’t No Fun.” And from here ... who knows?

73) Teenage Fanclub – “Baby Lee”

In which Teenage Fanclub is the Silent Majority.

Saw Teenage Fanclub, Guided By Voices, Superchunk, and Green Day in concert in 2010. Kinda regret not seeing Weezer last week. Nineties nostalgia is here!

74) Black Keys – “Everlasting Light”

I understand that oftentimes my blog is basically me screaming into the void, and I also understand that a lot of you who *do* read my blog get burned out on the hundreds of bands that I *love* and that you *have to hear right now*.

Every so often, though, I'll get an extremely positive and largely unexpected response to a band. Obviously, this makes me very happy. This year, that band was Black Keys. I guess anytime Will Leitch, Drew Magary, and I can agree on a band, there's bound to be more than a little crossover potential.

75) Titus Andronicus – “Four Score and Seven”

As mentioned in one of the extended Hold Steady essays above, Titus Andronicus frontman Patrick Stickles will totally cat-sit for you if you need him to. As Craig explained it, *“I went over to pick up my cat, and Patrick came to the door with a life-sized puppet of himself that he'd apparently spent the entire day making. He was really excited. I eventually confirmed that the cat was fine.”*

76) Das Racist – “Fashion Party” (f/ Chairlift)

“I can't tell if you wanna hit me or if you wanna dance ...”

Between sets at the Teenage Fanclub show, Gene and I were talking about Die Antwoord, a South African novelty rap act that was inexplicably a big deal on the blogs for most of 2010. Neither one of us had anything positive to say about Die Antwoord. More than that, though, as Gene put it, “I'm not even sure why I'm *supposed* to like them.” And that's the problem with conceptual art, really – it's mostly an inside joke. The cool kids know why it's good. And, if you don't get it ... well, what does that say about you? As culture becomes more and more self-aware, self-referential, and knowingly ironic, it seems like more and more bands now require a joint degree in Sociology and Cultural Studies for the listener to understand exactly why a given song is supposed to be relevant.

Das Racist is another act that falls into the “novelty rap” genre, and it's easy to see why. Their breakthrough single, “Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell” is basically a repetition of exactly those words for three minutes. One of their 2010 mixtapes samples Enigma's “Return to Innocence.” There is a lot of free-association word matching. A lot of the time, it sounds like a joke. And yet, the taste-makers in the blogosphere kept insisting that this was an important group, maybe a zeitgeist-defining group, a group who had more to say about America in the year 2010 than almost anyone. It's understandable for the causal listener to be confused.

I think I'm open to art that looks like a joke, as long as someone can explain its value to me, even if I never would have figured it out on my own. I've always been a big Andy Warhol fan because I've read pretty extensively about his life and philosophy and I think I understand why painting a soup can was supposed to mean something. I will readily admit that I *never* would have figured this out on my own.

So I'll admit that my Das Racist fandom requires extrinsic sources. David Shapiro's writing about the band over at Pitchfork Reviews Reviews is absolutely required reading. The band's own interviews are also helpful, as well as their op-ed piece about the TV show *Outsourced*. In fact, every quote I heard from these guys made me like them more. If you understand exactly how smart they are, if you're willing to assume a method to their madness, even if you can't always see it ... then their songs start sounding a whole lot better.

And it doesn't hurt that their beats and production have gotten exponentially cleaner, even between their two 2010 mixtapes. "Fashion Party" might be that rare Das Racist song that doesn't even require the proper context.

In conclusion ... I love the idea of Chairlift making beats. Are they the least hip-hop band in the world? I say yes. And yet, their sound fits here. Awesome.

77) The Apples in Stereo – "Hey Elevator"

In which indie pop is neither.

The band themselves called their new album "retro-futuristic," and I can get behind that. It's the sound of something that would get airtime on the only oldies station on the radio after the robots take over. Shiny and metallic, yet strangely soft to the touch.

78) Tinashe – "Zambezi"

The Zambezi (also spelled Zambesi) is the fourth-longest river in Africa, and the largest flowing into the Indian Ocean from Africa. The area of its basin is 1,390,000 square kilometres (540,000 sq mi), slightly less than half that of the Nile. The 3,540-kilometre-long river (2,200 mi) has its source in Zambia and flows through Angola, along the borders of Namibia, Botswana, Zambia again, and Zimbabwe, to Mozambique, where it empties into the Indian Ocean.

The Zambezi's most spectacular feature is the beautiful Victoria Falls. Other notable falls include the Chavuma Falls at the border between Zambia and Angola, and Ngonye Falls, near Sioma in Western Zambia.

If you're looking to write a near-perfect, Paul Simon's *Graceland*-style song about the *longer* African rivers, the top three are:

- The Nile-Kagera
- The Congo-Chambeshi
- The Niger

The Ubangi-Uele is fifth, but, c'mon ... you're better than that.

79) Old 97s – "Champaign, Illinois"

Here's a story that showcases the undeniable coolness of everyone involved. One night, years ago, out on the road, the guys in Old 97s began improvising a song built around the structure of Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row." They came to like the song, played it live a few times, but knew they could never release it because it cribbed too much from Dylan. They didn't want to ruin it by needlessly tinkering with it.

So they called Dylan, played him the song, and asked for his blessing. He listened to the song, read the lyrics, and wholeheartedly signed off on it. So now Dylan gets half a songwriting credit on the new Old 97s album.

And I get a mystical song devoted to one of the mystical places in my life. I was so close to attending the University of Illinois for law school that I actually get Illini alumni junk mail. They once accidentally sent me a five-figure financial aid check. It's one of the most obvious "What Could Have Been" alternate realities in my life.

The choices I made instead led me to Ilana, and so of course they were the right ones, but if you remove relationships from the equation ... it's hard to say if I would have been better off in the great Midwest. I love San Francisco more than anything, but the prospect of being debt-free ... that seems an almost impossibly liberating thought for all those long days in an office, wondering if this is really *it*. Where would I go? What would I do?

I did not go to Champaign, Illinois, but I did not go to heaven, either. Apparently there was a third option not mentioned in the song.

80) Morning Benders – "Promises"

Berkeley! But then, later, moved to Brooklyn ... which I'm less excited about. Honestly, how confident do you have to be about your band to move to Brooklyn? As I understand it, every single person in Brooklyn has a band that, at one time or another, has been written up on Pitchfork. As someone who was once in one of the three best unsigned bands in La Crescent, Minnesota (population: 4,900), let me tell you ... you really don't need all that extra competition.

81) of Montreal – "Sex Karma"

"You are my only luxury item / If anyone tries to steal you I'll fight 'em"

Guy who wrote the "Let's Go Outback Tonight" jingle teams with Beyonce's little sister to write the best, most playfully flirtatious long song of the year. Because why not.

Time for our second (and final) Fluxblog swipe: *It's flirty and light, a head rush of infatuation and fascination that feels almost as good as the real thing. It's not overly serious either. It's playful and goofy, the lyrics put it in the terms of child-like wonder, enthusiasm, and exploration. I love that Barnes has Solange sing "you are my only*

luxury item, if anyone tries to steal you, I'll fight 'em." For one thing, it just comes out sounding adorable, but in terms of pop music subtext, it's a total flip on the usual dynamics of the lyrics in her famous sister's hit singles. Instead of putting attraction and relationships in terms of accruing power and riches, this is simple and not at all crass: You're what matters to me, everything else is just stuff.

82) The Limousines – “Internet Killed the Radio Star”

I'll have no problem retroactively bumping this song up about fifteen spots if it turns out the band's name is a super-obscure Strong Bad reference.

As it is, they get the benefit of the doubt because they're from San Jose. And it's fascinating to me that the lead singer used to be in Strata because, if I remember right, those guys were *horrible*.

83) Hot Chip – “One Life Stand”

The one song on this list that demands to be experienced at maximum volume. It's not even so much a song as it is a series of vibrations.

84) Generationals – “Trust”

Ilana thinks the first minute of this song sounds like the backing track to one of those image-rehabilitation commercials for some huge faceless corporation, where it's all children smiling and graduates walking across the stage and dogs jumping into lakes and a voice-over saying something like, *“We're working with you to build a better future.”* That sounds about right.

Also, the two guys who make up Generationals were previously in the now-defunct The Eames Era, one of Gene's favorite bands. If you missed those guys the first time around (like I did), don't make the same mistake twice.

85) Cut Copy – “Take Me Over”

The uncool Cut Copy single, mostly because it's a shot-for-shot remake of Men at Work's “Down Under.” And, upon hearing it, you'll realize you've always wanted exactly that. I mean, that song came out in 1981. It was time for another one.

86) Kanye West – “All of the Lights”

In 1997, Trey Parker and Matt Stone got George Clooney as a guest star for an episode of South Park. That episode was “Big Gay Al's Big Gay Boat Ride.” Parker and Stone used Clooney as the voice of Stan's dog, Sparky.

In 2001, Welsh band Super Furry Animals got Paul McCartney to guest on their *Rings Around the World* album. The band used the sound of McCartney chewing carrots and celery as a percussion track on the song “Receptacle for the Respectable.”

So, in 2010, the fact that Kanye got Elton John to provide backing piano somewhere on this track ... it’s not the smallest, most bizarre celebrity cameo of all time, but it’s up there.

I’m purposefully avoiding saying anything really substantive about Kanye or *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* because I think almost everything has been said. If I had to guess, I’d say the Kanye album and the Arcade Fire album are the two lasting cultural artifacts of this year, the albums that – for better or worse – future generations will look to in an attempt to figure out what was going on in 2010. While neither one was among my absolute favorites of the year, I can’t really quibble with the choices.

87) The Radio Dept. – “Heaven’s on Fire”

Let’s recap The Year In Sweden. Nine songs in the Top 100 (three Robyn, Jens Lekman, Sambassadeur, Teddybears, Tallest Man on Earth, The Radio Dept., and jj). Enough near-misses that they filled up an entire Outtakes post. A two-disc Best of Sweden mix back in the spring. One of the best concerts of the year (Shout Out Louds) and one of the most bizarre concert-like experiences (jj). Chances that Ilana and I will visit Sweden next summer and never come back because I get a job at Labrador Records: Still threat level orange.

88) Two Door Cinema Club – “You’re Not Stubborn”

A shiny, lighthearted sound that could only come from ... Northern Ireland? That can’t be right.

This is still Curt’s pick for album of the year. Jamie skipped a Hold Steady show to go see these guys at Popscene. A lot of people with excellent taste in music really love Two Door Cinema Club. You could be one of those people. I hear it’s like a secret society.

89) Scissor Sisters – “Whole New Way”

It’s a weird thing to say, since they’re basically a drag show in musical form, an over-the-top experiment in glam-rock dance excess, but almost all of the very best Scissor Sisters songs feature prominent acoustic guitar. “Take Your Mama Out.” “I Don’t Feel Like Dancin.” And now this one. I can’t be the only one breathlessly looking forward to the Scissor Sisters *Unplugged* album, right?

Saw these guys at the Fox in Oakland, and it was definitely my Concert of the Year.* A spectacle in every sense of the word. If you’re wondering, the band confirmed that this song is *exactly* as obscene as you think it is. I’ll just leave that one to your imagination.

Finally, I went to this concert with JD. We also saw *Brokeback Mountain* together in theaters, and we've been roommates together at three different locations. Are we basically common-law gay married at this point? Are there, like, tax breaks associated with that?

** Apologies to Robyn, The Very Best, Shout Out Louds, Paul McCartney, Gaslight Anthem, Free Energy, Foxy Shazam, Little Boots, La Roux, Gold Motel, and of course The Hold Steady. Wow it was an incredible concert year.*

90) Foxy Shazam – “Oh Lord”

I think I would read an entire book of Band Name Explanations. Here's one of the better ones, from frontman Eric Nally: *“I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and was one of two white boys in an all-black high school. The band name Foxy Shazam came from a saying in my school meaning, “cool shoes.” If you had cool shoes kids would say those are “foxy shazam.” Because of this we have a lot of soul, and try to let it bleed through our music as much as possible. Mom and Dad were pretty poor as I was growing up but always supported my musical interests nonetheless. In the early years they bought my band cheap guitars and amps and drove us to shows in the family Thunderbird. I owe them big time and will someday repay them.”*

91) Sierra Leone's Refugee All-Stars – “Living Stone”

So my proposed rule would be that, unless you are an *actual refugee*, you are prohibited from making reggae music. So we would be able to keep great songs like this one, and we would be able to get rid of ... well, basically everything else.

92) Big K.R.I.T. – “Hometown Hero (Remix)” (f/ Yelawolf)

In which there are just so many words.

Here's a question that's either really deep or really stupid, I honestly can't tell:

The best things about this song are (1) the sample (Adele's “Hometown Glory”); (2) the Friday Night Lights-quoting intro; and (3) Yelawolf's incredible second verse.

I'm assuming Big K.R.I.T. didn't make the beat. I'm assuming he didn't write Yelawolf's verse.

However, I'm also assuming he *chose* the beat, and that he *chose* to work with Yelawolf.

So, even though Big K.R.I.T.'s two verses are absolutely the two weak links in this song, the fact remains that this is a Big K.R.I.T. song on my Top 100 list.

Given those facts: Do I think Big K.R.I.T. is a good artist or not?

93) Free Energy – “Bang Pop”

By my count, Free Energy played San Francisco six times in 2010 (Rickshaw Stop as part of Noise Pop, 330 Ritch opening for Dan Black, two nights at Great American Music Hall opening for Mates of State, Independent opening for Titus Andronicus, Slim’s headlining). They also played once in San Jose and I think once in Santa Cruz. The band is from Philadelphia. They have no real connection to San Francisco that I can see.

So here’s my proposal for Free Energy: just move here. Become the band in residence at some smaller club (think about Cafe du Nord, maybe Elbo Room), and, like the Beatles in Hamburg, play every night, put in your 10,000 hours, perfect your craft, and become the best band in the world. It could work.

94) Stars – “Fixed”

Concept album about ghosts? Concept album about ghosts.

Every year, it seems like there are a couple songs toward the end of my Top 100 where what I really want to say is, “Yes, this song is pretty good, but mostly I just want to remind you that what we have here is a band with an incredible back catalog. Please go listen to some of their older stuff.”

I’ll put up a few songs on the blog. In the meantime, enjoy the best use of the word “fisticuffs” I heard all year.

95) Sun Airway – “Put the Days Away”

Combines the once-cool think from 2001 that no one seems to care about anymore (The Strokes) with the once-cool thing from 2009 that no one seems to care about anymore (Animal Collective) and amazingly turns the result into something fresh and interesting. Based on sonic description alone, this is probably the song on this list I’d be least interested in hearing (Pitchfork said “*The song’s foundation is a sea of throbbing tones and uncertain drone*”). And yet it’s great.

96) Vampire Weekend – “Giving Up the Gun”

Contra came out January 12, 2010, but it seems like this record has been out for about ten years now, doesn’t it? Is that just me? I know “Holiday” is in every commercial on TV right now, but honestly, VW already sound like they belong to a different time.

“Giving Up the Gun” seemed to be the consensus best song on *Contra*, and it’s easy to see why. While some Vampire Weekend song seems like sketches of ideas,* “Giving Up the Gun” is their most fully-realized idea yet. More than anything else they’ve done,** it sounds like they put in as much time and energy as was necessary to get it exactly right.

* *And this is true even for some of their best songs.*

*** And I have no idea whether this is actually true.*

97) Frightened Rabbit – “Nothing Like You”

Somehow both anthemic and depressing at the same time, like a really bummed-out U2.*

While recording 2010’s *The Winter of Mixed Drinks*, lead singer Scott Hutchison offered this quote: *“The theme I’m going for is pushing yourself out to the edge of things and being alone, feeling lost and not knowing where you are, which is how I’ve felt recently. It’s not all fun and games, but hopefully it’ll just be less obviously personal and brutal than the last record. Less oppressive.”*

Less oppressive? Sellouts!

** And yes, I understand that Irish and Scottish accents are different things.*

98) Black Keys – “Tighten Up”

Originally, the best thing about this song was the homemade-looking music video the band put up on YouTube, featuring a dancing plastic dinosaur puppet named Frank the Funaksaurus.

Months later, when the song became a popular radio single, the band decided to release another, “Official,” video. Which seemed unnecessary to me, given the genius of the first one. I was ready to be disappointed. But ... honestly, the second video is pretty great, too. It’s funny and it’s got little kids fighting and the band hitting each other with drums and stuff ... I guess I approve. BUT YOU DIDN’T HAVE TO THROW FRANK UNDER THE BUS LIKE THAT, BLACK KEYS!!!

99) jj – “Let Go”

In which it was like watching someone perform a concept album.

Like most of the Sincerely Yours catalog, jj seems devoted to recreating the moments both before and after a dream. Woozy, warm, inviting, disconnected, muted, incoherent, disorganized, a free-association collage of images and sounds, comfortable and disorienting. That’s jj, and their surreal live show is all of those things, too, only more so.

100) MGMT – “Flash Delirium”

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard* is about an artist who gets so good at realism that eventually he just snaps. His ability to reproduce anything in the world almost exactly leads him to a career of the most conceptual, abstract modern art, pictures of nothing and paints that decompose after years in galleries. You hear the same thing about jazz musicians

occasionally, too. The most experimental artists were the ones who started out as technical masters. It seems that eventually you get bored with your own incredible precision.

In 2008, MGMT wrote three of the biggest, sharpest pop hooks of the decade (“Time to Pretend,” “Kids,” and “Electric Feel”). 2010’s *Congratulations* ... has no hooks at all. Maybe a couple very small ones. There is not one radio-friendly minute of music on it. It’s warm, 1960s Zombies-influenced pop music, but it doesn’t contain even the possibility of a hit.

So there are two possibilities, then. Either MGMT tried to write another “Kids” and just failed, or they reached that point where writing hit songs became tedious, and they struck out in the most abstract direction they knew.

I think it’s too early to know for sure which way MGMT’s career will go,* but I love the concept of the band that got sick of writing hits. That’s a storyline I’ll keep following.

** Though it’s interesting to note that MGMT’s “big hits” record and MGMT’s “no hits” record both got matching 6.8s from Pitchfork. Nice to know that, whatever you do, you can expect a pleasantly lukewarm reaction to it.*