

Your Groove

by Sanjay Nambiar

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This week's genre:

FANTASTIC ALBUMS YOU MAY NOT OWN BUT SHOULD

For most of the general music-listening public (this excludes those music fanatics among us who have their mail addressed to Amoeba Records), the experience of music enjoyment consists of many hours of radio time and a collection of about 30-50 cds. Today, we could speak to the evil nature of radio and how it unashamedly pollutes music artistry and creates lemmings of us all. But, such vitriol will be saved for another discussion. Instead, today we'll examine the ubiquitous cd collection, and suggest some additions that'll take your library from "Oh, I've heard that on KISS FM," to "Damn, where'd you get that?!"

The standard cd collection revolves around the most innocuous and ever-pleasant greatest hits collections and platinum-selling records from a handful of artists. A quick look at any collection will almost certainly turn up something from Celine Dion, Mariah Carey, Limp Bizkit, No Doubt, U2, Madonna, R.E.M., and Backstreet Boys (c'mon, admit it, "I Want It That Way" is a fantastic pop song). And with good reason: these musicians have been the icons of our generation and several others, and some have them have given us endearing and high quality songs. They have paved the way for the financial success for countless other artists as well.

But, to some bourgeoisie-minded degree, these artists represent the mainstream, the 5% of all musicians that comprise over 90% of the music industry's revenues. While the mainstream is indeed entertaining, it unfortunately is often a bit trite, compensating for a lack of originality and insightful songwriting with pervasive marketing, radio play, tight clothes, and TRL videos. Once we step outside of the mainstream, we find artists that are more raw, but that give us music that is so engaging and powerful that going back to the mainstream becomes difficult. . . .

Below, I have listed a few albums that you'll rarely, if ever, hear on the radio, VH1, or MTV. Nevertheless, if you are fortunate to hear these albums somewhere (like in a boutique shop on La Brea or some lounge in Silverlake), you just might forego that morning talk show and instead pop in that cd on your way to school. . . . Enjoy.

Beth Orton, "*Central Reservation*." Her voice cuts into you like an old memory that makes you stare off into nowhere and just smile. . . . On "Central Reservation," Beth Orton is able to meld strong vocals, acoustic work, and electronic elements in a rare fusion that is both innovative and sincere. Extremely honest and fulfilling.

Jurassic 5, “*Quality Control.*” This sextet rules the burgeoning west coast underground hip hop scene. “Quality Control” doesn’t propagate the angst of modern hip hop/rock fusion, but instead infuses soul and De La Soul-like beats with witty lyrics to forge a tour-de-force of fun, kickin’ music.

Nightmares on Wax, “*Carboot Soul.*” Like New York hip-hop and lounge music hooked up with 70s soul and created a child of great depth and understanding. Nightmares on Wax (aka George Evelyn and Kevin Harper), has an uncanny ability to make you listen to a single song over and over again. Walking the line between several genres, this album can be played at a party, at dinner, or just for thoughtful repose.

Van Morrison, “*Astral Weeks.*” One of the best albums of all time, but unfortunately somewhat forgotten by younger generations. Released in 1968, “Astral Weeks” brought together folk, acoustic, and intimations of Celtic music in some of the most inspired songwriting popular music has ever seen. Mellow and incisive, this is a must have for anyone who truly appreciates music.

Call And Response, “*Call And Response.*” A local band from San Francisco, and a throwback to the happy pop of the 60s. Call and Response have a knack at creating happy, fun music that makes you feel like growing your hair out and frolicking in open meadows.

The Flaming Lips, “*The Soft Bulletin.*” One of the most critically acclaimed albums of the past 10 years. “The Soft Bulletin” feels like the soundtrack to a movie that Kubrick and Coppola would collaborate on. Dramatic and edgy, this album doesn’t set into you until the 3rd or 4th listen, but then it’ll become one of your favorites. . . .

Everything But The Girl, “*Everything But The Girl.*” The seminal duo’s debut U.S. album, way back in 1984. Replete with atmospheric acoustics, jazzy riffs, bossa nova stylings, and Tracey Thorn’s magnificent voice, this album is about solace in love, and its sense of melancholy is absolutely wonderful and poignant.

Gomez, “*Bring It On.*” Darlings of the British alternative/underground rock scene. Gomez combine unique arrangements with raw rock progressions and raspy vocals to create a college music sound that transcends the college years.

Elliot Smith, “*Either/Or.*” Elliot Smith is the hero of the indie rock world. On “Either/Or,” he brings back a sense of folk, rock, and songwriting that popular music hasn’t seen since the likes of Nick Drake and Van Morrison. Introspective and wistful, this album is amazing. Some tracks were also featured in the movie, “Good Will Hunting.”

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JAZZ

Jazz is one of the very few truly American art forms. Other forms of expression have originated in the U.S. – the New York School's abstract expressionism and urban hip-hop, for example – but none have had the global, artistic, and enduring influence of jazz. For decades this music embodied entertainment for most Americans. From the 1920s to the 1950s, jazz artists were the most popular musicians in the country (Louis Armstrong, Bennie Goodman, Miles Davis, to name a few), and the songs from that era encapsulate the mood and spirit of several generations.

For this week's column, we could easily expound on the rich history and profound impact of jazz, but that discourse could go on for days. Instead, we'll lay down an overview of jazz, and introduce a few essential records. The point here is to open up the closed world that many think jazz to be, to introduce jazz as something that is "user-friendly" and indeed for everyone.

Jazz, for a variety of reasons, intimidates many people. For one, the music is generally without lyrics (although, there are some amazing jazz vocalists, like Ella Fitzgerald). Second, the artists today are relatively obscure, and jazz is seen as something for older folks or for people who are really into music. For music heads and novices alike: please do not let these false impressions sway you. Jazz is beautiful, accessible, easy to understand, and transcends all cultural or ethnocentric boundaries. And some of the tones and melodies in jazz can move you in abstract, emotional, and visceral ways that no lyrics in popular music can even come close to approaching.

If after exploring jazz you do not develop a fiery passion for the genre, then at the least you'll have some fantastic dinner music, and you'll come across as urbane and suave as you try to get dates. Jazz is also great background music for studying purposes. Some research has pointed out that babies and infants who are exposed to jazz develop higher I.Q.s (not sure if this works if you're past puberty, though. . . .). Plus, when you're trying to make meaningless small talk with some corporate recruiter, there are few things more impressive than dropping names like Coltrane or Thelonious Monk. Trust me, jazz is way cool.

The following is an extraordinarily brief history of jazz. The roots of jazz music are entrenched in the gospel music sung by slaves, and its movement into the mainstream of America began in New Orleans at the turn of the century. During the 20s, 30s, and 40s, jazz was the most popular music played on American radio. Louis Armstrong sold more records than any other artist during this period (though the racial climate of the time prevented him from reaping the financial fruits of his genius). Jazz was the music of both

world wars. In the first half of the century, jazz bands and orchestras were the equivalent of dance clubs today. In the late 40s, bop-jazz began to develop and forever changed the evolution of popular music. The rhythms and tones were fast, furious, and unlike anything heard before.

As rock and roll began to conquer America in the 50s, the popularity of jazz waned. The progress of jazz music, however, only moved further into new and exciting forms. Miles Davis championed “cool” jazz, and later began the genre of “fusion,” which mixes electronic elements (electric guitar, synthesizers) with jazz to create abstract, funky musical landscapes.

Through the 70s and 80s, jazz struggled to launch an act that would appeal to the masses. In recent years, however, artists such as Joshua Redman and Branford and Wynton Marsalis have attained significant stardom. Still, jazz remains relatively esoteric to the mainstream, which is an absolute shame, because it is the grandfather of almost all popular genres of music and because it can bring so much joy to so many people.

For this week’s column, I’ve listed a few records that can serve as an “introduction” to the sublime world of jazz music. Most of this music comes from the post-bop and cool jazz era of the 50s and early 60s. The records are great starting points for the journey into jazz, and represent some of the most critically acclaimed musical work of the 20th century. Enjoy.

Miles Davis, “*Kind Of Blue.*” One could easily recommend ten Miles’ records that are phenomenal. “Kind Of Blue” is the best selling jazz record of all time, and is a great example of his genius and starting point for many who are just getting into jazz. Except for perhaps The Beatles, no artist influenced the evolution of music in the 20th century more than Miles Davis.

John Coltrane, “*Giant Steps.*” Brilliant. Just absolutely brilliant. Coltrane’s ability was on another planet, and he could play scales faster than MBA students can envision money. “Giant Steps” beautifully incorporates the smooth melodies of bop, and keeps Coltrane’s abstract excursions to levels that are accessible and approachable.

Thelonious Monk Quartet, “*Monk’s Dream.*” Thelonious Monk played piano like Richard Feynman did physics: with crazy, reckless abandon, but with incisive genius. “Monk’s Dream” is a classic, and is the type of music you hear at all those cool art-house coffee joints.

Cannonball Adderley, “*Somethin’ Else.*” Wow. This set is so smooth that it will redefine any concept of smoothness you’ve ever had. Just sit down in the middle of your sofa with a nice drink and enjoy the introspective ballads and melodies on this record.

Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers, “*Moanin’.*” Man, Blakey sure could drum. But even beyond his percussion prowess was his ability to bring together the best jazz musicians of his time. On “Moanin’,” you can tell these guys are having a ball, and creating timeless music in the process.

Dave Brubeck Quartet, "*Time Out*." Brubeck and company embodied the smooth stylings of what was know as "west coast jazz." On this record, they released one of the most famous jazz tracks of all time, "Take Five." Sure, Brubeck received much grief for being a popular white jazz musician, but his music is fantastic nonetheless.

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DOWNTEMPO

Ahh, downtempo. Chill music. Relaxation music. Funky dinner music. Downtempo is the music genre of choice for the hip, urban lounge, the restaurant on Sunset that wants to be cool as it serves a \$15 burger, and to people who like electronica but don't have the stamina for house or trance. Replete with more soul than noise, more environment than special effects, downtempo can range from enlightened artists that perfectly capture a subtle mood to studio engineers that bore us with trite loops. As with every genre of music, there are some lackluster musicians in downtempo, and some absolute jewels. Below you'll find a brief history of the genre and a selection of albums that, should you choose to explore, could bring you much joy.

Although the primordial roots of downtempo can be traced back to the lounge music of the 1960s, this genre first found definition in the mid 1970s, with the seminal David Bowie/Brian Eno collaboration, "Low," and in the synthesizer music that was born in the wake of disco. This music was the harbinger of electronica – an expansive genre that generally focuses on experimentations in sound and mood and is heavily entrenched in dance beats (house music, for example). Throughout the 80s, several alternative rock bands, such as The Cure, New Order, and Depeche Mode, issued instrumental tracks that echoed themes of downtempo music. In the early 90s, electronica and downtempo burgeoned, and the music started to branch off into several sub and related genres, such as ambient, technosoul, lounge, trip-hop, and acid jazz, just to name a few.

The obscurity of some of this music might be intimidating; but, if you give it a chance, you just might find yourself in new, wonderful sonic surroundings. If you're having some friends over for a mellow dinner, going for drive along PCH, or just engaging in some introspection while sprawled out on your living couch, here are some downtempo suggestions for you (the more popular suggestions are listed first):

Kruder and Dorfmeister, "*The K&D Sessions*." Butter, but without the nasty cholesterol. This is viewed by many as the definitive and penultimate downtempo record. Great background music as you discuss Camus with your significant other.

Portishead, "*Dummy*." At times dark and haunting, but always honest. Beth Gibbons gives us amazing female lead vocals, and the track "Sour Times" was a popular club and lounge hit.

Massive Attack, "*Protection*." The title track alone is worth the purchase price of this record. Massive Attack are one of the most respected forces in Downtempo/Trip-hop. On this particular record, they utilize the plaintive and incisive voice of Everything But The Girl's Tracey Thorn (of "and I miss you, like the deserts miss the rain. . . " fame) to develop tracks that leave a lasting impression.

Thievery Corporation, "*Mirror Conspiracy*." Thievery Corporation remix other artist's tracks, and in their process of theft they create wholly new interpretations that even their victims would be proud of. This specific record includes Brazilian rhythms and light melodies that will make you feel like you're drinking smooth libations from coconut shells on Ipanema.

Café del Mar, "*Volume Seis*." The Café del Mar compilations are the signature chill out records of Ibiza, the legendary and infamous party island off the coast of Spain. DJ Jose Padilla puts together a sublime mix on volume six.

Nightmares on Wax, "*Carboot Soul*." Like New York hip-hop hooked up with 70s soul and created a child of great depth and understanding.

dZihan and Kamien, "*Refreaked*." A collection of remixes from this duo's debut album, "*Freaks and Icons*." But, don't let the title frighten you; even the most normal among us can enjoy the atmospheric jams on this record.

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HOUSE MUSIC

Though most of us have heard of house music, its exact meaning and importance remains a bit nebulous to the masses. We've all heard the club kids in our hallways excitedly ranting about their favorite DJ coming to town. We've heard the stories of all-night raves and revelry in underground clubs across the country. But, for many of us, what exactly is going on here? First, we'll need to break down the basics of dance music for you; then, we'll get into the details of the fantastic grooves we call "house."

Dance music can essentially be described by its pace, or what djs call "beats per minute (BPM)." On the BPM scale, drum and bass music is the fastest. Then comes trance, house, trip-hop, and hip-hop. If you listen to these genres carefully, or if you've been to clubs where this type of music is played, the pace of the music becomes evident. Within each genre, the use of electronic sounds and bass lines and drum beats varies. Trance music tends to emphasize loops and electronically-generated bells and whistles, while house and hip-hop tend to focus on bass lines, vocals, and heavy beats. Each of these types of dance music has devotional followings on religious scales, and the war as to which is "better" or "cooler" may go on forever. Judgments aside, all of these musical styles are absolutely fantastic, with some incredibly talented musicians, producers, and djs within each genre. In today's column, we'll discuss the specifics of house music.

House music often features female vocals, and the catch for dancers and listeners is in the melodic bass lines and driving drum beats. House music djs create their sets in movements, astutely taking crowds up to crescendos and slowly bringing them down to more manageable moods. The ability to control this journey for a dance floor is the at heart of the art of deejaying. Also, house is the kind of music that people can dance to by themselves; there is no real need to dance with a partner. Herein lies a big distinction between the culture of house (and trance and drum and bass) and other types of dance music, such as hip-hop, disco, or salsa.

House music was born in post-disco underground clubs during the late 1970s. New York, Detroit, London, and Chicago were the epicenters of house music for most of the 80s. The Warehouse club in Chicago termed the phrase "house music." In the late 80s to early 90s, house music began to infiltrate radio waves, and the whole country danced to house music songs from C&C Music Factory, Madonna, and Black Box.

This type of house emphasized vocals and many pop-music elements, and was not as popular in the true underground scene, but was phenomenally successful in the mainstream. In the late 90s, as rave culture moved out of the cellar and into our living rooms, house music evolved into many granular sub genres. Tribal house, deep house,

progressive house, trance-house, San Francisco house, and happy house are just a few variations on the house music theme. Many DJs today have the global appeal and stardom that once was reserved only for rock stars, and when they spin (“spinning” is a synonym for deejaying) they can sell out venues that hold thousands.

If house music still seems foreign to you, do not worry. The best way to become acquainted with this type of dance music culture is to listen to the music. You don’t need to be under a strobe light to enjoy the tunes. Just approach the genre with an open mind, and with a proclivity to dance until you burn a hole in your shoes. Below, you’ll find a few records that provide a great starting point for getting into house.

Mark Farina, “*San Francisco Sessions.*” Deep house/San Francisco house. Constantly driving, but with peaks and semi-valleys that will keep you fixated and intrigued throughout. Farina is a hero in the San Francisco and Chicago club scenes, and this might be his best studio effort.

John Digweed, “*Bedrock.*” Progressive house. Digweed made a name for himself with his collaborations with DJ Sasha, but his solo work has solidified his status as one of the most prominent and loved djs in the world. On this record, Digweed puts together a relentless dance music set. Great for late night parties.

Miguel Migs, “*Nite: Life 03.*” Deep house/happy house. Migs represents the lighter side of house, with beats that aren’t driving so much as they are smooth. This is music that you can dance to and music that is great for mellow/fun background moods.

Basement Jaxx, “*Remedy.*” House/Progressive house. This duo from Britain found crossover success with “Remedy.” Accessible and very entertaining, this is a great dance record. The track “Red Alert” garnered high rotation in many clubs in the U.K. and the U.S.

Danny Tenaglia, “*Global Underground: Athens.*” Tribal house/garage house. Tenaglia is one of the absolute legends of house music. Notorious for throwing 8+ hour sets at dance clubs, Tenaglia gets nasty and tribal on this record. The beats here indeed are primitive, and you indeed will be moved.

Steve Lawler, “*Global Underground: NuBreed.*” Tribal house. Lawler mixes African beats and percussions with house music in a way that will melt you to the bone. So tribal, this stuff would make Dian Fossey want to dance.

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