

## Overzicht van CD's gekocht in 2006.

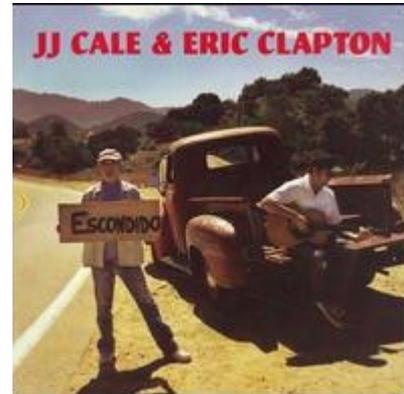
### The Road to Escondido – JJ Cale & Eric Clapton

Two artists had an enormous impact on [Eric Clapton's](#) music in the '70s: [Delaney & Bonnie](#) and J.J. Cale. [Clapton](#) joined [Delaney & Bonnie's](#) backing band after [Cream](#) dissolved, an experience that helped him ease away from the bombast of the power trio and into the blend of soul, blues, pop, and rock that defined his solo sound.

[Delaney Bramlett](#) helped steer [Clapton's](#) eponymous 1970 solo debut, which not only came very close to replicating the sound of [Delaney & Bonnie's](#) records from that time, but also had a rollicking version of J.J. Cale's "After Midnight" that was [Clapton's](#) first solo hit. Cale's influence

surfaced again a few years later on [Clapton's](#) 1978 album *Slowhand*, which not only had J.J.'s sardonic "Cocaine" as its centerpiece but also drew heavily from Cale's laconic groove.

Although [Clapton](#) progressively polished his sound over the course of the '80s, dabbling in pop along the way, he never quite strayed from the blueprint that he wrote based on his love of Cale's music, so his decision to team up with Cale for a full-fledged duet album called *The Road to Escondido* in 2006 felt natural, perhaps even overdue. After all, [Clapton's](#) work has borne the imprint of Cale's sound for over three decades now, so a duet record 36 years after [Eric](#) had a hit with "After Midnight" feels right. Initially, [Clapton](#) planned to cut a record with Cale functioning as a producer, but the project morphed into a duet album where Cale has a stronger presence than [Clapton](#): the superstar might have brought in his longtime producer/collaborator [Simon Climie](#), who has helmed every one of his records since 1998's *Pilgrim*, but Cale brought in members of his backing band and wound up writing 11 of the album's 14 tracks, effectively dominating *The Road to Escondido*. Even if Cale is the driving force behind the album, it's easy to listen to the album and think otherwise, since [Climie](#) gives this a precise, polished production that's entirely too slick for the rootsy music the duo plays, which in turn makes it sonically similar to all [Clapton](#) albums of the past ten years. Also, there are a lot of cameos from familiar pros (drummer [Steve Jordan](#); bassist [Pino Palladino](#); guitarists [Albert Lee](#), [Derek Trucks](#), and [John Mayer](#); the late [Billy Preston](#) in some of his last sessions), giving this a crisp, professional vibe more in line with [Clapton](#) than Cale.



But the real reason that it would be easy to mistake *The Road to Escondido* as a solo [Eric Clapton](#) effort is that it's nearly impossible to distinguish him from J.J. Cale throughout the entire record. Sure, there aren't nearly as many synths as there were on *Reptile* or the stilted adult pop of *Back Home*, but the laid-back groove — even when the music starts jumping, it never breaks a sweat — sounds like a [Clapton](#) record through and through. More than that, *The Road to Escondido* reveals exactly how much [Clapton](#) learned from Cale's singing; their timbre and phrasing is nearly identical, to the point that it's frequently hard to discern who is singing when. Disconcerting this may be, but it's hardly bad, since it never feels like [Clapton](#) is copying Cale; instead, it shows their connection, that they're kindred spirits. And if [Clapton](#) popularized Cale's sound, he's paying him back with this record, which will bring him to a wider audience — and Cale, in turn, has given [Clapton](#) his best record in a long time by focusing [Clapton](#) on this soulful, mellow groove and giving him a solid set of songs. While it is hard not to wish that there was a little less NPR slickness and a little more grit to the record — this is roots music after all, so it should have some dirt to it — this is still a very appealing record, capturing the duo working the same territory that's served them both well over the

years but still finding something new there, largely because they're doing it together and clearly enjoying each other's company. It's relaxed and casual in the best possible sense: it doesn't sound lazy, it sounds lived-in, even with [Climie](#)'s too-clean production, and that vibe — coupled with Cale's sturdy songs — makes this is an understated winner.

### **Bat Out of Hell III – Meat Loaf**



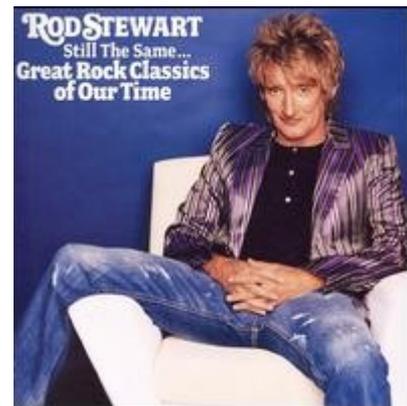
Truth be told, once Meat Loaf had a blockbuster with [Bat Out of Hell](#) in 1977, he never really left the bombastic sound of that [Todd Rundgren](#)-produced, [Jim Steinman](#)-written classic behind. He went through a long stretch where he didn't have any hits — it's popularly known as the '80s — but he kept reworking the album, never quite getting it right until he re-teamed with [Steinman](#) for 1993's [Bat Out of Hell II: Back Into Hell](#), which became a surprise international hit, re-establishing Meat Loaf as a major star. After that record, he never went away, continuing to record, tour, and act, but nothing quite matched the success of either [Bat Out of Hell](#), so it made perfect sense for Meat to go back to the [Bat](#) well a third time in the mid-2000s — over 12 years since the second [Bat](#) and nearly 30 years on from the first. But there was a hitch in his well-laid plan: [Steinman](#) didn't want to participate. This was a problem, because the [Bat](#) albums were as much [Steinman](#)'s as they were Meat Loaf's — and this point was never hidden, either, as [Steinman](#)'s name was prominent on the cover of both [Bats](#). Undaunted, Meat Loaf went ahead with the project, hiring [Desmond Child](#) as producer and picking several older [Steinman](#) songs to form the heart of [Bat Out of Hell III](#), which now bore the subtitle of *The Monster Is Loose*. As the album's fall 2006 release date approached, [Steinman](#) took Meat Loaf to court over the record — after all, not only had he written the [Bat Out of Hell](#) albums, but he owned the copyright to the phrase, so Meat needed permission in order to release the record. Permission was eventually granted in an out-of-court settlement, paving the way for the October 2006 release of [Bat Out of Hell III](#), a record that had many [Steinman](#) songs but in no way features his involvement in the recording or production of the album. And, boy, is his absence ever felt! His presence looms large over the record — quite obviously on the songs he wrote, but the very aesthetic of the album is copied wholesale from his blueprints — yet it's the ways that [Bat III](#) is different, both big and small, that points out who is missing at this party.

For one, this [Bat](#) is quite obviously a patchwork, pieced together from things borrowed and re-created, never quite gelling the way either of the previous [Bats](#) did. And if there's one thing that theatrical rock like this needs, it's a narrative through-line or at least a concrete goal. [Child](#) and Meat Loaf do have a goal, but it's merely to re-create the glory days; they're not quite so picky on how they get there. So, [Child](#) brings in [Mötley Crüe](#)'s [Nikki Sixx](#) and [Marilyn Manson](#)'s guitarist [John 5](#) to pen the opening "The Monster Is Loose," and the results are disarming, a grindingly metallic riff-rocker that sits very uncomfortably next to [Steinman](#)'s "It's All Coming Back to Me Now," written with Meat in mind (at least according to the singer) but originally recorded by [Celine Dion](#). Such jarring shifts in tone are common throughout *The Monster Is Loose*, not just as it moves from song to song, but within the tunes themselves, as [Child](#)'s compositions chase after the grandeur of [Steinman](#)'s work yet bare all the marks of a professional who is playing a game without bothering to learn the rules. The same is true for the very sound of [Bat III](#). Although original [Bat](#) producer [Todd Rundgren](#)

adds some necessary pomp with his vocal arrangements, the album is at once too heavy and too clinical, lacking the gaudy, gonzo soul that made [Bat Out of Hell](#) irresistible camp. It's a brightly lit mess, but there is one redeeming factor here and that's Meat Loaf, who is singing his heart out as he valiantly tries to make this [Bat](#) a worthy successor to the originals. That he fails is not the fault of his individual performance; it's the fault of botched execution. Perhaps if he were teamed up with a [Steinman](#) who was ready to play, they could have turned *Bat Out of Hell III* into something special, but going it alone, Meat Loaf was missing a crucial element of what made his [Bat](#) albums magic. It's like [Harrison Ford](#) shooting a fourth *Indiana Jones* without [Steven Spielberg](#)'s direction.

### **Still the Same ... Great Rock Classics of Our Time – Rod Stewart**

Early on in his career Rod Stewart established himself as one of rock's great interpretive vocalists, which made the flatness of his [Great American Songbook](#) series a bit puzzling. If any classic rock veteran of the '60s *should* have been able to offer new spins on old standards, it should have been Rod the Mod, who was turning [Elvis](#)' "All Shook Up" inside out on [Jeff Beck's Truth](#) and turned [the Rolling Stones](#)' defiant "Street Fighting Man" into a folk-rock lament, all before "Maggie May" turned Rod into a star. But none of the [Great American Songbook](#)

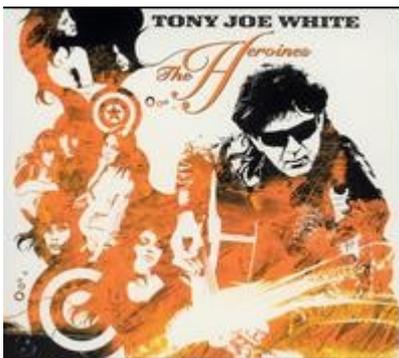


volumes strayed from the tried and true, which may have been part of the reason they were big hits – after all, familiar songs are always warmly received when they're performed in a familiar fashion – but they were filled with undistinguished performances that bordered on laziness. It was possible to make excuses for his performances, chief among them that Stewart was simply not rooted in this material, so he simply chose the easiest route out of the song, but it didn't change that all three records were deadly dull, even if they were enormous successes one and all. It's hard to give up that success, particularly for a veteran who was so desperate for a hit a few years back, he foolishly attempted the clunky modern R&B album [Human](#), so it's not surprising that when he moved on from the Great American Songbook, he chose a related project: *Great Rock Classics of Our Time*, which is the subtitle of 2006's *Still the Same*, his first new record since [GAS](#), and one that shares the aesthetic of that respectful and commercial trawl through the past. *Still the Same* finds Rod singing 13 songs that more or less could be called rock standards, every one of them hits since Stewart himself was a hitmaker, most of them dating from the '70s, when he was a superstar (roughly ten, if you count "Love Hurts" as a hit for [Nazareth](#), which in this context you should).

Not a bad idea at all, at least on paper, since this would seem to return Rod to his strengths: singing rock & roll and pop, influenced by soul and a little bit of country and folk. This theory has a bit of a problem, however. It's made under the assumption that it would be the Rod of the '70s singing songs from the '70s instead of the Rod of the new millennium singing songs of the '70s – and the latter, of course, is what is featured on *Still the Same*. That means instead of Rod the Interpreter you get Rod the Karaoke Star, singing over arrangements that aren't merely familiar, but nearly exact replicas of the original hits. This isn't far removed from [The Great American Songbook](#), which never offered a surprise, but those at least had the excellent work of [Richard Perry](#), who was faithful without being slavish. Here, almost without exception, the arrangements deliberately recall the original hits, right down to grace notes and throwaway fills. This doesn't

necessarily make for a lousy record, since Rod does indeed sound more comfortable fronting a rock band than he did singing with a big band, but it's an awfully lazy record, as Stewart makes no attempt to stamp these tunes with his own personality. Nowhere is that truer than on "It's a Heartache." [Bonnie Tyler](#)'s delivery on the original was a downright homage to Rod, so close to his raspy phrasing that it was (and is) often mistaken for Rod himself. So what does he do on his version? He copies it, right down to the inflections. It's not bad; it's just pointless, because [Tyler](#)'s original sounds more like classic Rod than Rod's does here. And while that sentiment may hold true for only "It's a Heartache," the rest of the album sags under its predictability. The title *Still the Same* is all too true: these are the same versions of the same old songs you know and love, only they're now sleepily sung by Stewart. It's not the worst album he's done, and it's an improvement over [The Great American Songbook](#) if only because it plays to his strengths, but it aspires to be nothing more than pleasant and it achieves nothing so much as being forgettable. There are worse sins in popular music, of course, but coming from a singer who once reinterpreted songs with a wild, ragged imagination, it's hard not to see the utterly pedestrian *Still the Same* as a disappointment, something not worthy of his formidable legacy.

### **The Heroines – Tony Joe White**

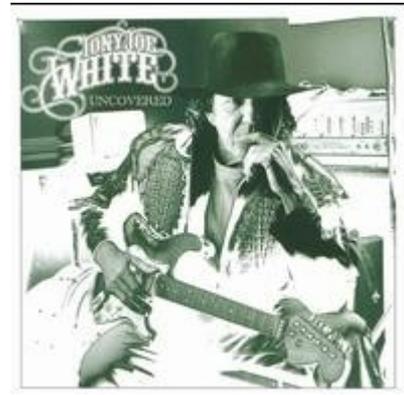


Tony Joe White, aka *the Swamp Fox*, has been on a roll these past few years, issuing album after self-released album of quality original material full of deep, dark, blues-flavored Florida vintage roots music. *Heroines* is no exception, but it is a record with a twist. First, it's on the Sanctuary label. Secondly, five of the record's 12 tracks are recorded with female vocalists in duet. They include the great [Jessi Colter](#), [Shelby Lynne](#), [Emmylou Harris](#), [Lucinda Williams](#), and [Michelle White](#). The set opens with "Gabriella," a brief, jazzy flamenco-kissed instrumental, played on a pair of acoustic guitars. "Can't Go Back Home" stars [Lynne](#). A true laid-back Tony Joe nocturnal swamp blues, it nonetheless carries within it that slightly menacing tension. [Lynne](#)'s voice, which is well known for its power, showcases its other side here, one that is expressive, soulful and sensual even on slow burn. White's vocal whispers its edgy truth, underscored by his signature guitar sound. "Closing in the Fire," with [Williams](#), is a steamy, R&B growler with horns. The riff is a mid-tempo take-off from her own "Hot Blood," and this tune feels as if it is an update of hers. "Playa del Carmen Night," with its Spanish folk overtones, is a duet between White and his daughter [Michelle](#). It's a whispering love ballad, one that shimmers with acoustic guitars and hand percussion. [Michelle White](#), a fine country and blues singer in her own right, brings the notion of memory inherent in the song's body full-force to the front line. It's bittersweet and beautiful. "Wild Wolf Calling Me" features [Harris](#) in fine voice at her country gospel best. White's baritone snakes around her plaintive wail and moan and brings a hint of the foreboding eternal to her testament. [Colter](#) is a country music legend, and this track's the evidence as to why. Her subdued, deeply expressive, reedy croon goes up against the fuzzed-up blues guitars, while White's ominous baritone adds depth, and an otherworldly dimension, to his song. The rest of the cuts here, with White taking the vocals on his own, are fine as well. They simmer, just below the boiling point, touching on everything from backwoods life, love, politics, and spirituality, to the chaos in a country where firearms do more talking than at any time since the Old West, as in "Chaos Boogie." Tony Joe's writing is flawless, his guitar playing is phenomenal;

he gets more creative, funky expression from his minimal, fluid approach than many players who use a lot more notes. *Heroines* is another winner in *the Swamp Fox* catalog that once more proves not only is he a vital artist 35 years after his first big hit, but one whose consistency is remarkable and unsullied.

### Uncovered – Tony Joe White

Swamp Fox indeed. At this juncture, Tony Joe White should be called the Swamp Monster because on *Uncovered* he takes it to the limit. There are seven new cuts on *Uncovered*, and reworked versions of "Rainy Night in Georgia," "Taking the Midnight Train," and "Did Somebody Make a Fool Out of You." White has been making records for a long time, though not many in the U.S. noticed after the late '70s. Since late in the last century, White has been kicking them out from his home studio in Nash Vegas. The sound is trademark, slow-burning, and growling. It's sultry as a late August night in the bayou.



There are also, as is becoming *de rigueur* for legends these days, some surprise guest appearances. White has used them before and recently, on his killer *Heroines* set, where he played and sang with [Shelby Lynne](#), [Lucinda Williams](#), and [Emmylou Harris](#). This time out he's got some great partners. He cut "Not One Bad Thought," with [Mark Knopfler](#). The skittering interplay between them is worth the disc price to be sure. The pair apparently got together around a campfire with some food and beer and played the tune there first; they cut it in the studio shortly thereafter. [Michael McDonald](#) – yep, that one – guests on piano and vocals on "Don't Look Down," and it works like a charm, surprisingly. But the biggest news here is "Shakin' the Blues" with the late [Waylon Jennings](#). It's one of the last performances he ever wrote or laid down on tape, and the pair feel like the old friends they are. White can sing or play with anybody, which is why his music translated so well to other performers – primarily soul and R&B artists – but when collaborating, that guitar and slow, drawling menace are so sinister, there's no mistake about whose tune it is. Only on "Shakin the Blues" does that feel different, because of the sheer strength of [Jennings'](#) enigma. On other tracks, such as "Louvela," [J.J. Cale](#) contributed from Oklahoma, and wrote and sang two new verses for the song. [Eric Clapton](#) recorded his additions to "Did Somebody Make a Fool Out of You" from London and sent them – ahhhh – via digital technology. The whispering, funky blues of "Rebellion" when White lets it rip is another high point, and his band is perfectly suited to his pace and tension dynamic. "Rainy Night in Georgia," suffers not a bit from having been re-recorded. It's still one of the most beautiful songs to come out of the Deep South. The disc ends on an evil note with "Keeper of the Fire," with its fuzzed-out blues simmer and soulful backing vocals by [Odessa Settles](#), and a horn section featuring [Wayne Jackson](#) on trumpet. White never needs to raise his voice because the power in its nearly whispered restraint has all the power of a slow-burning fire that becomes a blaze. For those who didn't already know, White is back – with a vengeance.

## Rudebox – Robbie Williams



The careers of most music celebrities are like passenger ships, able to steam along nearly indefinitely without the least chance of modifying course. With his work of the 21st century, Robbie Williams appeared to have set himself on a course that was guaranteed to keep him working for decades, remaining important to thousands of fans, but never varying from the type of adult alternative singer/songwriter material expected of him. Then came *Rudebox*, which proves he's not that simple – or at least, not that satisfied with himself. It may be a good album because it says little about his inner life and emotional troubles, which are unceremoniously

dropped in favor of hyper-sexualized or sarcastic dance music and ironic laugh-getters ("Make your body shake like you stood on a land mine," "Dance like you just won at the Special Olympics"). It may be a good album because it has some of the best productions of his career, usually amped-up electro-disco from the duo [Soul Mekanik](#) or goofy hip-hop soul from [Mark Ronson](#) (which makes him come across as [Justin Timberlake](#) at some points and [Gnarls Barkley](#) at others). It's *certainly* a good record in comparison to its two predecessors, which suffered from a lack of vitality. (For example, while 2005's *Intensive Care* desultorily attempted to rewrite [the Human League's](#) "Louise," *Rudebox* simply covers the song, with much more feeling.) Compared to [Escapology](#) and [Intensive Care](#), *Rudebox* is not only loose and fun but, for the first time in Williams' career, receptive to outside help; aside from the producers, [Lily Allen](#) and [the Pet Shop Boys](#) make appearances, and Robbie covers songs from [Manu Chao](#), [Lewis Taylor](#), [Stephen Duffy](#), and the indie band [My Robot Friend](#). Not that the record is perfect; in fact, it has a few of the most embarrassing moments in Williams' career. The lyrics occasionally devolve into hip-hop nonsense ("Got no strings, but I think with my ding-a-ling/[Wu-Tang](#) with the bling-bling, sing a song of Sing Sing"). "The 80s" is even worse, a nostalgic but monotone rap that oddly balances adolescent trauma and pop culture ("Auntie Jo died of cancer/God didn't have an answer/Rhythm was a dancer"). Still, the next track after "The 80s" is "The 90s," a surprisingly bewitching chronicle of his boy-band years from 1990 to 1995. The fact remains that every track here is better and more interesting than anything from the previous two LPs, despite the occasional embarrassing couplet or misguided musical idea.

## 3121 – Prince

[Musicology](#) was a self-conscious comeback, a record designed to return Prince to the spotlight and the charts, and it worked: even if it spawned no big hits, the 2004 LP became his first album to crack the Billboard Top Ten since 1995's *The Gold Experience*, get a fair amount of radio play, and get a bunch of positive press, along with a well-received tour. Prince no longer seemed like an eccentric consigned to the fringes: he seemed like a savvy pro, reclaiming a reputation and respect that he'd lost. That he did it with an album that sounded uncannily like a deliberate return to classic Prince as performed by [the New Power Generation](#) was almost beside the point: it was enough that he sounded engaged, and that he made a focused,



purposeful album. Its quickly delivered 2006 follow-up, *3121*, proves that [Musicology](#) was no fluke. Like its predecessor, *3121* is tight and concise, offering 12 songs in 53 minutes, and it's classically structured, emphasizing shifting moods and textures between songs. It is an album, not a collection of songs, and you could even call it old-fashioned, but it feels fresher than [Musicology](#), as if Prince had listened to enough [Neptunes](#) productions to understand how they've absorbed his music. That acknowledgement doesn't come often — it's evident in the sly, sexy grooves of "Black Sweat" and the squealing synths of "Lolita" — but since it's paired with an emphasis on dance tunes and a retreat from the enjoyable but endless [NPG](#)-styled vamping that characterized a good portion of [Musicology](#), *3121* winds up sounding lively, varied, and, at its best, exciting. And at the beginning of the album, *3121* is quite exciting, as Prince revives his high-pitched alter ego [Camille](#) on the title track and dives head first into the electro-funk of "Lolita" and "Black Sweat," songs that recall such mid-period masterpieces as "Kiss" or "Sign 'O' the Times" without being rewrites. Nevertheless, the fact that the freshest sounding music here still has a direct line back to records Prince made 20 years prior is a good indication that the album, like Prince himself in the wake of hip-hop, is a little bit conservative, emphasizing funk of both the [James Brown](#) and [George Clinton](#) varieties, late-night slow jams, classic dance, and soul, instead of wrestling with modern music. While that may disappoint some listeners who yearn for the return of the trailblazing Prince of the '80s, when he reinvented himself with each record, it's hardly surprising that a 47-year-old musician is spending more time refining his palette than expanding it. What is a surprise is that Prince is in top form as both a writer and record-maker; perhaps the one-man-band nature of its recording doesn't mean the album is as gritty or raw as his reliably thrilling live performances, but *3121* crackles with excitement, filled with different sounds and styles. Best of all, this is filled with songs that hold their own as individual tunes, yet gel into a cohesive record that is thankfully devoid of an overarching concept, a problem that plagued his albums after [Diamonds and Pearls](#). *3121* does fall short from being perfect — there may be no bad songs, but the momentum slows ever so slightly on the second half — yet it's something more valuable than being a one-off classic: it's proof that Prince has indeed returned as a vital, serious recording artist on his own terms. Maybe he's no longer breaking new ground, but his eccentricities are now an attribute, not a curse, which goes a long way in making his trademark blend of funk, pop, soul, and rock sound nearly as dazzling as it did at his popular and creative peak in the '80s.

### **Piece by Piece – Katie Melua**



Georgia-born (as in the country) singer/songwriter Katie Melua found herself atop the British chart in 2003 with her breezy debut [Call Off the Search](#). It sold over three million copies in Europe alone. Her laid-back blend of blues, jazz, and pop with a kiss of worldbeat drew comparisons to [Norah Jones](#), and rightfully so. She sticks to the formula on her lush, ultimately safe follow-up, *Piece by Piece*. This is [Coldplay](#) for the [Diana Krall](#) crowd, a perfectly rendered slice of adult contemporary pie for a lazy summer day delivered by an artist whose beautiful voice is almost striking in how unremarkable it is. Her longtime collaborator, producer/songwriter [Mike Batt](#), provides the catchiest number, an odd and endearing little confection called "Nine Million Bicycles." It's both silly and sweet, two things that work in Melua's favor. Sure, she can vamp it up with the best of them on bluesy asides like "Shy Boy" and the dreadful "Blues in the Night," but there's a whole lot of innocence in

that voice that just shrivels in the midst of all that bravado. Only in her early twenties, Melua's got plenty of time to decide on a persona, and *Piece by Piece* has enough quality material on it to placate fans until she does, but there's some tension here, and it doesn't sound intentional. Besides, anyone who covers [Canned Heat](#) and [the Cure](#) on the same record is still trying to figure it all out.

### **Call of the Search – Katie Melua**

English listeners went mad for Katie Melua with the release of her debut album there in late 2003. Issued domestically in June 2004, *Call Off the Search* posits the lovely Melua pristinely in between pop, adult contemporary, and traditional American musical forms, with savvy marketing handling the finishing touches. (Think [Norah Jones](#).) It's a comfortable, lightly melodic affair that drinks red wine safely in the middle of the road. Raised in Soviet Georgia and the United Kingdom, Melua has a beguiling accent that colors the ends of her phrases, adding character to her velvety, if occasionally only satisfactory singing voice. She has a nice time with the understated R&B sashay of [John Mayall](#)'s "Crawling Up a Hill," as well as [Mike Batt](#)'s "My Aphrodisiac Is You," which is spiced up with barrelhouse piano, muted trumpet, and sly references to opium and the Kama Sutra. The singer's own "Belfast (Penguins and Cats)" opens nicely with a few measures of solo acoustic guitar before it's joined by the orchestral maneuvers that sweep through the majority of *Call Off the Search*'s after-dark cabaret. (Melua also penned a dedication to [Eva Cassidy](#), who she's been compared to vocally.) While the instrumentation is never overbearing, a stoic version of [Randy Newman](#)'s "I Think It's Going to Rain Today" and a couple of late-album pop vocal entries do dawdle a bit in the soft-focus halo that hovers over *Search*'s more easygoing stretches. These selections are perfectly capable, yet pretty obvious, as if the decision was made to sprinkle Melua's debut equally with safety and variety, in case a particular style didn't stick. Still, despite a few detours down easy street, *Call Off the Search* is a promising debut, and comfortable like the first drink of the evening.



### **Last Man Standing – Jerry Lee Lewis**



It often seems like there are only two ways for rock, country, and blues veterans to launch comebacks when they're senior citizens: confront mortality head on or surround yourself with superstar guests to help carry you through a half-hearted stroll through your back catalog, scattering a few new tunes along the way. At first glance, Jerry Lee Lewis' *Last Man Standing* seems to fall into both categories: the title suggests that Jerry Lee is in the mood to take a long look back, and certainly the very concept of the album – pairing Lewis with 21 other stars for a succession of duets, often on material that his guests either wrote or made famous – seems like a typical superstar duet record. But the Killer has never been predictable, and nowhere is that truer than it is here, where Jerry Lee treats [Mick Jagger](#), [Keith Richards](#), [John Fogerty](#), [Bruce Springsteen](#), [Jimmy Page](#),

and 16 other stars as he treated [the Nashville Teens](#) at the Star Club in 1964 – as game amateurs who have to sprint to keep up with the master. This is the only guest-studded superstar album where all the guests bend to the will of the main act, who dominates the proceedings in every conceivable way. Jerry Lee doesn't just run the guests ragged; he turns their songs inside out, too – and nowhere is that clearer than on the opening "Rock and Roll," the [Led Zeppelin](#) classic that is now stripped of its signature riff and sounds as if it were a lost gem dug out of the Sun vaults. Far from struggling with this, [Jimmy Page](#) embraces it, following the Killer as he runs off on his own course – he turns into support, and the rest of other 20 guests follow suit (with the possible exception of [Kid Rock](#), who sounds like the party guest who won't go home on an otherwise strong version of "Honky Tonk Woman").

The label might sell [Last Man Standing](#) on the backs of the duet partners – after all, it's awful hard to drum up interest in a record by a 71-year-old man no matter how great he is, so you need a hook like superstars – but the album by no stretch of the imagination belongs to them. This is completely Jerry Lee's show from the second that he calls out, "It's been a long time since I rock & rolled," at the beginning of the record – and those are true words, since he hasn't rocked on record in a long, long time. Ten years ago he cut the [Andy Paley](#)-produced [Young Blood](#), but that was a typically tasteful self-conscious comeback record; it was driven as much by the producer's conception of the artist as it was the artist himself. The opposite is true here, where the production is simple and transparent, never interfering with the performances; it has the welcome effect of making it sound like there is simply no way to tame Jerry Lee, even though he's now in his seventies. And that doesn't mean that this is merely a hard-rocking record, although "Rock and Roll," "Pink Cadillac," and "Travelin' Band" do indeed rock harder than anything he's done since the '70s – so hard that they stand proudly next to his classic Sun records, even if they don't have the unbridled fire of those peerless sides. No, this album touches on everything that Jerry Lee has done musically through his career, as the furious rock & roll is balanced by pure hardcore country, pile-driving boogie woogie, rambling blues, old-timey folk songs, and, especially, reinterpretations of familiar songs that are so thoroughly reimagined they seem like they were written specifically for Jerry Lee. And he does this the same way he's always done it: by singing and playing the hell out of the songs. His phrasing remains original and unpredictable, twisting phrases in unexpected ways – and, yes, throwing his name into the mix frequently, too – and his piano is equally vigorous and vital. This is a record that stays true to his music, and in doing so, it's not so much a comeback as it is a summation: a final testament from a true American original, one that explains exactly why he's important. But that makes [Last Man Standing](#) sound too serious, as if it were one of those self-consciously morbid [Johnny Cash](#) records – no, this is a record that celebrates life, both in its joys and sorrows, and it's hard not to see it as nothing short of inspiring.

## **The Arockalypse – Lordi**

With their operatic heavy metal and monster-movie stage persona, Lordi seemed a most unlikely choice to represent their native Finland in the 2006 Eurovision Song Contest. So just imagine how many jaws hit the floor when the group not only claimed top honors, but also earned the most points in the venerable event's history. Vocalist Tomi Petteri Putaansuu, aka [Mr. Lordi](#), assembled Lordi in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1996 following a concert headlined by his favorite band, [Kiss](#); after recruiting guitarist [Jussi Sydänmaa](#) (known as "[Amen](#)"), bassist [Magnum](#) (real name unknown), former [Children of Bodom](#) keyboardist [Erna Siikavirta](#) ("[Enary](#)"), and drummer [Sampsa Astala](#) ("[Kita](#)"), he began writing songs as well as creating the elaborate foam-latex monster costumes and pyrotechnic effects that would become the hallmark of their theatrical live performances. After a series of label auditions went nowhere, Lordi signed to Sony BMG Finland and in 2002 issued a debut LP, *Get Heavy*, which rose to the number three spot on the Finnish charts on the strength of the number one single "Would You Love a Monsterman?" [Magnum](#) left the group soon after, and with new bassist [Pekka Tarvenen](#) ("[Kalma](#)"), Lordi cut a sophomore album, 2004's *The Monsterican Dream*, returning to the Top 20 with "Blood Red Sandman." After touring in support of the LP, both [Tarvenen](#) and [Siikavirta](#) left the lineup, and with new bassist [Samer el Nahhal](#) ("[Ox](#)") and keyboardist [Leena Peisa](#) ("[Awa](#)"), Lordi released a third full-length, *The Arockalypse*. When the record's chart-topping lead single, "Hard Rock Hallelujah," was appointed Finland's official entry in the 2006 Eurovision Song Contest, some religious leaders criticized the move, charging the band with advocating Satanism (even in the face of their 2003 hit "The Devil Is a Loser"); Lordi scored the most points in contest history with 292, 44 more than runner-up [Dima Bilan](#) of Russia. In the wake of Lordi's victory — Finland's first in Eurovision competition — tabloids from across Europe scrambled to publish photos of the band sans makeup, earning criticism from fans and media rivals alike and forcing public apologies from the offending parties. On May 26, 2006, Lordi celebrated their triumph with a free open-air performance in Helsinki's Market Square, playing to more than 80,000 fans. Finland president Tarja Halonen even took the stage to award the band for their global recognition.

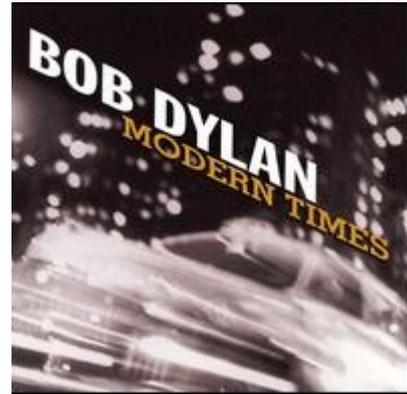


## **See You As I Do – Trijntje Oosterhuis**



## Modern Times – Bob Dylan

When Bob Dylan dropped [Time Out of Mind](#) in 1997, it was a rollicking rockabilly and blues record, full of sad songs about mortality, disappointment, and dissolution. 2001 brought [Love and Theft](#), which was also steeped in stomping blues and other folk forms. It was funny, celebratory in places and biting in others. Dylan has been busy since then: he did a Victoria's Secret commercial, toured almost nonstop, was in a couple films – [Larry Charles'](#) *Masked and Anonymous* and [Martin Scorsese's](#) documentary *No Direction Home* – and published the first of a purported three volumes of his cagey, rambling autobiography, *Chronicles*. Lately, he's been thinking about [Alicia Keys](#). This last comment comes from the man himself in "Thunder on the Mountain," the opening track on *Modern Times*, a barn-burning, raucous, and unruly blues tune that finds the old man sounding mighty feisty and gleefully agitated: "I was thinkin' 'bout [Alicia Keys](#)/Couldn't keep from cryin'/She was born in Hell's Kitchen and I was livin' down the line/I've been lookin' for her even clear through Tennessee." The drums shuffle with brushes, the piano is pumping like [Jerry Lee Lewis](#), the bass is popping, and a slide guitar that feels like it's calling the late [Michael Bloomfield](#) back from 1966 – à la [Highway 61 Revisited](#) – slips in and out of the ether like a ghost wanting to emerge in the flesh. Dylan's own choppy leads snarl in the break and he's letting his blues fall down like rain: "Gonna raise me an army, some tough sons of bitches/I'll recruit my army from the orphanages/ I've been to St. Herman's church and said my religious vows/I sucked the milk out of a thousand cows/I got the pork chop, she got the pie/She ain't no angel and neither am I...I did all I could/I did it right there and then/I've already confessed I don't need to confess again."



Thus begins the third part of Dylan's renaissance trilogy (thus far, y'all). *Modern Times* is raw; it feels live, immediate, and in places even shambolic. Rhythms slip, time stretches and turns back on itself, and lyrics are rushed to fit into verses that just won't stop coming. Dylan produced the set himself under his Jack Frost moniker. Its songs are humorous and cryptic, tender and snarling. What's he saying? We don't need to concern ourselves with that any more than we had to [Willie Dixon](#) talking about backdoor men or [Elmore James](#) dusting his broom. Dylan's blues are primitive and impure. Though performed by a crackerjack band, they're played with fury; the singer wrestles down musical history as he spits in the eye of the modern world. But blues isn't the only music here. There are parlor songs such as "Spirit on the Water," where love is as heavenly and earthly a thing as exists in this life. The band swings gently and carefree, with [Denny Freeman](#) and [Stu Kimball](#) playing slippery – and sometimes sloppy – jazz chords as [Tony Garnier's](#) bass and [George Receli's](#) sputtering snare walk the beat. Another, "When the Deal Goes Down," tempts the listener into thinking that Dylan is aping [Bing Crosby](#) in his gravelly, snake-rattle voice. True, he's an unabashed fan of the old arch mean-hearted crooner. But it just ain't [Bing](#), because it's got that true old-time swing.

Dylan's singing style in these songs comes from the great blues and jazzman [Lonnie Johnson](#) (whose version of the [Grosz](#) and [Coslow](#) standard "Tomorrow Night" he's been playing for years in his live set). If you need further proof, look to [Johnson's](#) last recordings done in the late '50s and early '60s ("I Found a Dream" and "I'll Get Along Somehow"), or go all the way back to the early

years for "Secret Emotions," and "In Love Again," cut in 1940. It is in these songs where you will find the heart of Dylan's sweet song ambition and also that unique phrasing that makes him one of the greatest blues singers and interpreters ever. Dylan evokes [Muddy Waters](#) in "Rollin' and Tumblin'." He swipes the riff, the title, the tune itself, and uses some of the words and adds a whole bunch of his own. Same with his use of [Sleepy John Estes](#) in "Someday Baby".. Those who think Dylan merely plagiarizes miss the point. Dylan is a folk musician; he uses American folk forms such as blues, rock, gospel, and R&B as well as lyrics, licks, and/or whatever else he can to get a song across. This tradition of borrowing and retelling goes back to the beginning of song and story. Even the title of *Modern Times* is a wink-eye reference to a film by [Charlie Chaplin](#). It doesn't make Dylan less; it makes him more, because he contains all of these songs within himself. By his use of them, he adds to their secret histories and labyrinthine legends. Besides, he's been around long enough to do anything he damn well pleases and has been doing so since the beginning.

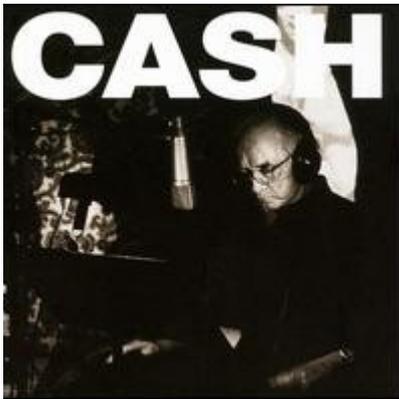
*Modern Times* expresses emotions and comments upon everything from love ("When the Deal Goes Down," "Beyond the Horizon") to mortality ("The Levee's Gonna Break," "Ain't Talkin'") to the state of the world – check "Workingman's Blues #2," where Dylan sings gently about the "buyin' power of the proletariat's gone down/Money's getting shallow and weak...they say low wages are reality if we want to compete abroad." But in the next breath he's put his "cruel weapons on the shelf" and invites his beloved to sit on his knee. It's a poignant midtempo ballad that walks the line between the topical songs of [Cisco Houston](#) and [Woody Guthrie](#) to the love songs of [Stephen Foster](#) and [Leadbelly](#). One can feel both darkness and light struggling inside the singer for dominance. But in his carnal and spiritual imagery and rakish honesty, he doesn't give in to either side and walks the hardest path – the "long road down" to his own destiny. This is a storyteller, a pilgrim who's seen it all; he's found it all wanting; he's found some infinitesimal take on the truth that he's holding on to with a vengeance. In the midst of changes that are foreboding, *Modern Times* is the sound of an ambivalent Psalter coming in from the storm, dirty, bloodied, but laughing at himself – because he knows nobody will believe him anyway.

Dylan digs deep into the pocket of American song past in "Nettie Moore," a 19th century tune from which he borrowed the title, the partial melody, and first line of its chorus. He also uses words by W.C. Handy and Robert Johnson as he extends the meaning of the tune by adding his own metaphorical images and wry observations. However, even as the song is from antiquity, it's full of the rest of *Modern Times* bemusement. "The Levee's Gonna Break" shakes and shimmies as it warns about the coming catastrophe. Coming as it does on the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, it's a particularly poignant number that reveals apocalypse and redemption and rails on the greedy and powerful as it parties in the gutter. There are no sacred cows – when Dylan evokes [Carl Perkins'](#) exhortation to put "your cat clothes on," it's hard not to stomp around maniacally even as you feel his righteousness come through. The great irony is in the final track, "Ain't Talkin'," where a lonesome fiddle, piano, and hand percussion spill out a gypsy ballad that states a yearning, that amounts to an unsatisfied spiritual hunger. The pilgrim wanders, walks, and aspires to do good unto others, though he falters often – he sometimes even wants to commit homicide. It's all part of the "trawl" of living in the world today. Dylan's simmering growl adds a sense of apprehension, of whistling through the graveyard, with determination to get to he knows not where – supposedly it's the other side of the world. The guitar interplay with the fiddle comes through loud and clear in the bittersweet tune. It's like how "Beyond the Horizon" uses gypsy melodies and swing to

tenderly underscore the seriousness in the words. It sends the album off with a wry sense of foreboding. This pilgrim is sticking to the only thing he knows is solid – the motion of his feet.

*Modern Times* portrays a new weird America, even stranger than the old one, because it's merely part of a world consumed by insanity. In these ten songs, bawdy joy, restless heartache, a wild sense of humor, and bottomless sadness all coexist and inform one another as a warning and celebration of this precious human life while wondering openly about what comes after. This world view is expressed through musical and lyrical forms that are threatened with extinction: old rickety blues that still pack an electrically charged wallop, porch and parlor tunes, and pop ballads that could easily have come straight from the 1930s via the 1890s, but it also wails and roars the blues. *Modern Times* is the work of a professional mythmaker, a back-alley magician, and a prophetic creator of mischief. He knows his characters because he's been them all and can turn them all inside out in song: the road-worn holy man who's also a thief; the tender-hearted lover who loves to brawl; the poetic sage who's also a pickpocket; and the Everyman who embodies them all and just wants to get on with it. On *Modern Times*, all bets are off as to who finishes the race dead last, because that's the most interesting place to be: "Meet me at the bottom, don't lag behind/Bring me my boots and shoes/You can hang back or fight your best on the frontline/Sing a little bit of these workingman blues." There is nothing so intriguing as contradiction and Dylan offers it with knowing laughter and tears, because in his songs he displays that they are both sides of the same coin and he never waffles, because he's on the other side of the looking glass. *Modern Times* is the work of an untamed artist who, as he grows older, sees mortality as something to accept but not bow down to, the sound that refuses to surrender to corruption of the soul and spirit. It's more than a compelling listen; it's a convincing one.

### **American V: A Hundred Highways – Johnny Cash**



*American V: A Hundred Highways* is the long-awaited album of Johnny Cash's final recordings, the basic tracks for which (i.e., Cash's vocals) were recorded in 2002-2003, with overdubs added by producer [Rick Rubin](#) after his death on September 12, 2003, at age 71. Between 1994 and 2002, Cash and [Rubin](#) had succeeded in fashioning a third act for the veteran country singer's career, following his acclaimed 1950s work for Sun Records and his popular recordings for Columbia in the 1960s and '70s. In the '80s, Cash's star had faded, but [Rubin](#) reinvented him as a hip country-folk-rock elder at 62 with [American Recordings](#) (1994), his first new studio album to reach the pop charts in 18 years. [Unchained](#) (1996) and [American III: Solitary Man](#) (2000) continued the comeback, at least as far as the critics were concerned, though none of the albums was actually a big seller. But [American IV: The Man Comes Around](#) (2002), propelled by Cash's cover of [Nine Inch Nails'](#) "Hurt" and a powerful video, stayed in the pop charts longer than any Cash album since 1969's [Johnny Cash at San Quentin](#). By 2002, however, Cash was in failing health, homebound and in a wheelchair, and he suffered a personal blow when his wife, [June Carter Cash](#), died on May 15, 2003. The American series, which posited Cash as an aged sage and the repository for a bottomless American songbook, had already shown a predilection for gloom in the name of gravity; it's no surprise that the fifth and final volume would be even more concerned with, as three earlier Cash compilations had put it, [God](#), [Love](#), and [Murder](#). The ailing septuagenarian certainly

sounds like he's near the end of his life, but that said, he doesn't sound bad. Cash was never a great singer in a technical sense: he hadn't much range, his pitch often wobbled, and his lack of breath control sometimes found him grasping for sound at the end of lines. But he was a great singer in the sense of projecting a persona through his voice; his emotional range, which went from a [Sinatra](#)-like swagger to an almost embarrassingly intimate vulnerability, was as wide as the spread of notes he could hit confidently was narrow. Such a singer doesn't really lose that much with age; in fact, he gains even more interpretive depth. Listening to this album, one can't get around the knowledge that it is a posthumous collection made in Cash's last days, but even without that context, it would have much the same impact.

The album begins with two religious songs, [Larry Gatlin](#)'s "Help Me," a plea to God, and the traditional "God's Gonna Cut You Down," which, in a sense, answers that plea. The finality of death thus established, Cash launches into what is billed as the last song he ever wrote, "Like the 309," which is about a train taking his casket away. The same image is used later in the cover of [Hank Williams](#)' "On the Evening Train," in which a man and his child put the coffin of a wife and mother on another train. Cash sings these songs in a restrained manner, and even has a sense of humor in "Like the 309," in which he complains about his asthma: "It should be awhile/Before I see Doctor Death/So it would sure be nice/If I could get my breath." In between the two train songs come songs that may not have been about death when their authors wrote them, but sure sound like they are here. As written, [Gordon Lightfoot](#)'s "If You Could Read My Mind" seems to concern a romantic breakup expressed in literary and cinematic terms, but in Cash's voice, lines like "You know that ghost is me" and "But stories always end" become inescapably elegiac. [Bruce Springsteen](#)'s "Further On (Up the Road)" is even easier to interpret as a call to the hereafter, with lines like "Got on my dead man's suit and my smilin' skull ring/My lucky graveyard boots and song to sing." These two songs make a pair with the album's two closing songs. [Ian Tyson](#)'s "Four Strong Winds" is, like the [Lightfoot](#) selection, a folk standard by a Canadian songwriter, also nominally about romantic dissolution, although here the singer who is "bound for moving on" doesn't seem likely to come back. And the closing song, "I'm Free from the Chain Gang Now," may have lyrics implying that the unjustly imprisoned narrator has been set free, but in Cash's voice it sounds like he's been executed instead and is singing from beyond the grave. The four songs in between "On the Evening Train" and "Four Strong Winds," dealing with faith and love (the former expressed in a previously recorded 1984 Cash copyright, "I Came to Believe"), are weaker than what surrounds them, but they serve to complete the picture. And it's worth noting that Cash at death's door still outsings croaking [Rod McKuen](#) on the songwriter's ever-cloying "Love's Been Good to Me." Cash may never have heard [Rubin](#)'s overdubs, but they are restrained and tasteful, never doing anything more than to support the singer and the song. If the entire series of American recordings makes for a fitting finale to a great career, *American V: A Hundred Highways* is a more than respectable coda.

## Destroyer – Kiss

The pressure was on Kiss for their fifth release, and the band knew it. Their breakthrough, [Alive!](#), was going to be hard to top, so instead of trying to recreate a concert setting in the studio, they went the opposite route. *Destroyer* is one of Kiss' most experimental studio albums, but also one of their strongest and most interesting. [Alice Cooper/Pink Floyd](#) producer [Bob Ezrin](#) was on hand, and he strongly encouraged the band to experiment – there's extensive use of sound effects (the album's untitled closing track), the appearance of a boy's choir ("Great Expectations"), and an orchestra-laden, heartfelt ballad ("Beth"). But there's plenty of Kiss' heavy thunder rock to go around, such as the demonic "God of Thunder" and the sing-along anthems "Flaming Youth," "Shout It Out Loud," "King of the Night Time World," and "Detroit Rock City" (the latter a tale of a doomed concert-goer, complete with violent car-crash sound effects). But it was the aforementioned [Peter Criss](#) ballad, "Beth," that made *Destroyer* such a success; the song was a surprise Top Ten hit (it was originally released as a B-side to "Detroit Rock City"). Also included is a song that [Nirvana](#) would later cover ("Do You Love Me?"), as well as an ode to the pleasures of S&M, "Sweet Pain." *Destroyer* also marked the first time that a comic-book illustration of the band appeared on the cover, confirming that the band was transforming from hard rockers to superheroes.



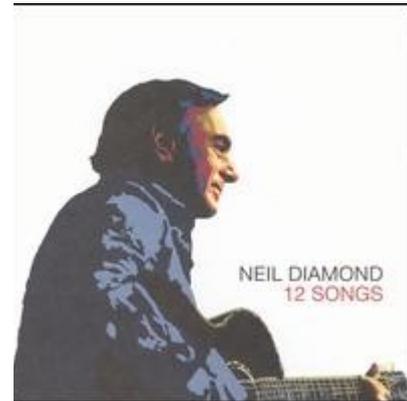
## Gene Simmons – Kiss



Most Kiss fans associate [Gene Simmons](#) with the band's hardest-rocking compositions; after all, he's responsible for such heavies as "Watchin' You," "Calling Dr. Love," "Larger Than Life," and "Goin' Blind." So many Kiss fans must have been surprised when they heard [Gene's](#) diverse 1978 solo album, with songs that contained choirs and string arrangements, plus elements of [Beatles](#) pop, '70s funk/disco, and feel-good rock & roll. Granted, there are a few heavy rockers (such as the single "Radioactive," "Burning Up With Fever," and "See You in Your Dreams"), but [Simmons](#) was always a closet [Beatles](#) fan, as evidenced by "See You Tonite," "Always Near You," "Man of 1,000 Faces," and "Mr. Make Believe." The only real misstep is a preposterously embarrassing cover of the Disney classic "When You Wish Upon a Star" (complete with Disney-esque sound effects/music). But [Simmons](#) made sure that the top artists of the day lent a hand ([Aerosmith's](#) [Joe Perry](#), [Cheap Trick's](#) [Rick Nielsen](#), [Donna Summer](#), [Cher](#), [Bob Seger](#), [Jeff "Skunk" Baxter](#), [Helen Reddy](#), and [Janis Ian](#)), which makes [Gene's](#) solo album an unpredictable yet ultimately enjoyable release.

## 12 Songs – Neil Diamond

Calling *12 Songs* Neil Diamond's best album in three decades may be a little misleading: truth be told, it doesn't have much competition in his discography. While Diamond never stopped making albums, he did seem progressively less interested in recording sometime after the [Robbie Robertson](#)-produced 1976 album *Beautiful Noise*. Following that weird, ambitious album, he pursued a slicker, streamlined course and started writing less original material. For a while, this paid off great commercial dividends, culminating in his 1980 remake of the [Al Jolson](#) film *The Jazz Singer*, but after 1982's *Heartlight* he slowly drifted off the pop charts. Over the next two decades, he toured regularly, turning out a new album every three or four years, and their patchwork nature of a few covers and a few originals suggested that Diamond wasn't as engaged in either the writing or recording process as he was at the peak of his career. With 2001's *Three Chord Opera* he delivered his first album of all-original material since *Beautiful Noise*, which was also his first non-concept album since 1991's *Lovescape* (he spent the interim cutting theme albums, such as a record devoted to Brill Building pop or a country-oriented collection). While it was uneven, it did suggest that Diamond was re-engaging with both writing and recording, and as he prepared material for a new record, he received word that producer [Rick Rubin](#) – the man responsible for [Johnny Cash](#)'s acclaimed '90s comeback, *American Recordings* – was interested in working with him, and the two combined for the project that turned out to be *12 Songs*.



[Rubin](#) was the first producer to push Diamond since [Robbie Robertson](#), but where [Robertson](#) indulged the singer/songwriter, [Rubin](#) drove Neil to strip his music down to his essence. As Diamond's candid liner notes reveal, [Rubin](#) wasn't a co-writer, he was a precise and exacting editor, encouraging Neil to rework songs, abandon some tunes, and to keep writing. The process worked, as Diamond wound up with a set of 12 songs (actually, 13 on the special edition that contains two bonus tracks, including an alternate version of "Delirious Love" featuring a delirious [Brian Wilson](#) contribution) that result in his most consistent set of songs ever. This is entirely [Rubin](#)'s doing, since he's the first producer to exercise such tight control over one of Diamond's albums. Where [Tom Catalano](#), the producer of Neil's '60s and early-'70s work, let Diamond indulge in flights of fancy and sheer weirdness, [Rubin](#) keeps him on a tight leash, only allowing a couple of light, cheerful songs into the finished product. Instead of encouraging Neil to write these rollicking, effortlessly hooky pop songs, [Rubin](#) brings the moody undercurrents of "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon" and "Solitary Man" to the forefront, pushing Diamond toward somber, introspective territory that his music suggested but never truly explored in the past. To highlight this mood, [Rubin](#) keeps the arrangements spare, even skeletal, reminiscent of the monochromatic nature of his [Cash](#) collaborations. *12 Songs* also shares with *American Recordings* a creeping sense of mortality, but where that sounded natural coming from [Johnny Cash](#), it's slightly affected here, since even when Diamond attempts to reach inward it's offset by his natural inclination toward hamminess. And that flair for the theatrical almost begs out for arrangements that are a little bit more fleshed out than what's here – not something as slickly cold as what he did in the late '70s, but something similar to the rich yet fruity orchestrations [Catalano](#) brought to Diamond's best songs.

But if *12 Songs* does occasionally come across as slightly affected in its intent and presentation, it also is inarguably Neil Diamond's best set of songs in a long, long time. Diamond's writing is not only more ambitious than it has been in years, but it's also more fully realized; the songs are tightly written, with the melodies bringing out the emotions in the lyrics. Similarly, Diamond also sounds engaged as a performer, singing with passion and unexpected understatement; it's his most controlled, varied vocal performance ever, and even if [Rubin](#)'s production is a bit too stark, it does force listeners to concentrate on the songs, which makes this a better case for Diamond's talents as a songwriter than most of his other albums. And that's why *12 Songs* is, in a way, even more welcome than [American Recordings](#). Where [Cash](#)'s comeback confirmed what everybody already knew about him, this presents a side of Neil Diamond that's never been heard on record and, in the process, it offers a new way of looking at the rest of his catalog – which is a pretty remarkable achievement, but the best thing about *12 Songs* is that it's simply one of the most entertaining, satisfying albums Diamond has ever released.