

## The '80s and James Brown Top the List of 2001's Best

Written by John James

Tuesday, 18 December 2001 18:00

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As the record industry cools down the factory boiler for the holidays, let me share with you my picks for the best of 2001. Favorite Single: Sugarcult, "Stuck In America" (Ultimatum Music). An energetic power-pop anthem that mixes up 1970s punk and 1980s power-chord pep spiked up with new-millennium swagger. The band cites Elvis Costello and Cheap Trick as influences, well-worn on the snotty sleeves of its *Start Static* album. Featuring guitarist Marko 72 (formerly of Nerf Herder, the Swingin' Udders, and the Ataris), the band toured the states this past summer on the Vans Warped tour.

**Retro Package:** *I Want My '80s Box!* (Hip-O). Not really a box set – the three-disc set folds up like a standard CD-size wallet – this 42-track selection makes you wanna stand up and crank out a few nice air-guitar improvisations with visions of Martha Quinn dancing in your heart. The thunderclap of MTV and cable TV sounded a mighty gestalt shift in entertainment landscape, and – bad haircuts and all – the decade produced a stunning amalgam of terrific pop songcraft burst free with new-wave technology. All the monster hits are here from The Fixx, ABC, Kool & the Gang, Robert Palmer, Peter Gabriel, A-Ha, Blondie, Squeeze, Yello, Night Ranger, Suzanne Vega, Oingo Boingo, and many more. Take a day off with Ferris Bueller, kick back in the eternal mental sun of *Miami Vice*, and escape to a kinder, gentler time.

### **The Best Moment of Using a Wonderful but Obscure Artist in a Target Commercial:**

Mary Lou Lord singing Daniel Johnson's beautiful "Speeding Motorcycle." Things are getting really weird.

**Packaging Design:** Lemon Jelly, *lemonjelly.ky* (Beggars Banquet). Collecting the *Bath*, *Yellow*, and *Midnight*

10-inch vinyl EPs from 1998, 1999, and 2000, respectively, this U.K. electronic duo of Nick Franglen and Fred Deakin serves up lovely, gliding soundscapes that tinker among found spoken-voice passages, shimmering beats, and groovy ambiance. Franglen holds a unique

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work history in his rise to work with Pulp, Primal Scream, and a host of Sony Playstation soundtracks, as his early career was gardening for the likes of Phil Collins and Trevor Horn. The CD's package is a gorgeous hard-cardboard tri-fold, shellacked and sheen, housing animated portraiture similar to the new

*Waking Life*

film. While it might not fit alongside your standard-sized discs, the package feels sturdy and timeless, in a design of pulsating color by Deakin, an occasional instructor at Central St. Martin's School of Art.

**Hot Import that Needs a Stateside Release:** Sam Brown, *Reboot* (Mud Hut). Jools Holland has referred to her as "Britain's greatest female vocalist," and I'd have to agree with him. From her debut at age 12 backing up the Small Faces to later résumé entries from Pink Floyd, Marillion's Fish, and Dodgy, this siren has rung all my bells with this, her fifth album. Harking back to days of Kate Bush and Rachel Sweet, Brown's voice swells skyward in a Gypsy trance, infused with wicked pop production and a sexy U.K. soul grind.

**Favorite Domestic Release of a Nifty Import:** Puffy AmiYumi, *Spike* (Epic Records). The Japanese duo of Ami Onuki and Yumi Yoshimura are Puffy AmiYumi, huge icons of the "J-Pop" music charts in Japan, having sold more than 14 million records in the past five years. Like a real-life Hello Kitty, these (then) teenage girls are the subject of coveted retail items like dolls, toys, and footwear. What are they singing about? Heck if I know, but the result is a hypnotizing swirl of

*Shaft-era*

downtown soul, electronic pixie quirkiness, 1960s soundtrack folk pop, television game-show horns, and Ventures' hip-shaking rhythm.

**Best Comedy CD:** Larry the Cable Guy, *Lord, I Apologize* (Spank-Um). Recorded live in Omaha, Nebraska, this alter ego of comedian Dan Whitney is a real knee-slapper full of blue-collar laughter, as he confesses all his redneck sensibilities, peppered with his trademark "Get 'er done!" Not necessarily as bright as his country-fed comrade, Jeff Foxworthy, Larry stumbles through life with a grin and one-liners like "I tried to smoke mushrooms but couldn't keep the pizza lit."

**Best Guilty Pleasure:** Out Of Phase, *Animals 2001* (Big Eye). Always a sucker for cool covers and twisted takes on the classics, I rather dug this remake of Pink Floyd's classic *Animals*

album by this mysterious group (it has already covered

*The Wall*

and

*Dark Side of the Moon*

albums) and its ambient introduction of Australian didgeridoo, Spanish guitar, and a full palette of lush electronic elements to the already hypnotizing Pink Floyd experience. The trance effect of these world-music and processed sounds gently lifts the vocals of Rebecca Phillip Burr over the affair, like a new digital morning come aflutter. Cool stuff.

**Best Upgraded Re-Issue:** James Brown, *Live at the Apollo Volume II* (Polydor) As part of Universal Music's new Deluxe Edition series, this original two-LP set from 1968 is wonderfully

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represented in a two-CD format that corrects the concert's original song sequencing and 17-minute jam of "Let Yourself Go/There Was a Time/I Feel All Right." A new essay from Grammy-winning music historian Alan Leeds is included in the CD's booklet, with lots of photos and original tour advertising. Featuring Brown's slower crooning ballads like "I Wanna Be Around" as well as barnburners like "Cold Sweat," this document of two nights in June 1967 highlights Brown's humanity and stone-cold grip on the funk.

**Next week:** my top-10 under-the-radar best of 2001 featuring The Anubian Lights, Ike Reilly, David Axelrod, Kitty in the Tree, Kelly Hogan, and more... .

### **Television Alert:**

The Late Show with David Letterman hosts Darlene Love tonight and Lenny Kravitz on Thursday; Late Night with Conan O'Brien welcomes Natalie Merchant on Thursday overnight; and The Tonight Show with Jay Leno features Elton John on Christmas night.