

## A Medicine for Melancholy: The Fifth-Annual Year-End Album

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Thursday, 16 December 2010 10:32

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For the fifth consecutive year, I present my year-end album – a collection of personal favorite tracks from 2010.

The rules are simple: Each artist is limited to one song, and performers included in the previous four editions of this project are disqualified. (Notable exclusions because of this rule are Shannon Wright, Grinderman, and the Shondes.)

This year's album is longer than past efforts, but it'll still fit on a CD. (Previous editions of this project: [2006](#) , [2007](#) , [2008](#) , and [2009](#) .)

As much as there can be a theme with a disparate collection, my 2010 album begins with and returns to loss. But I don't think it's a downer. Instead, I hope it's a demonstration of music as therapy or a salve, even when (or especially when) it comes from pain – a medicine for melancholy.



**Black Francis, “Bad News.”** I can't fathom how the Pixies frontman's songs work with the 1920 silent film *The Golem: How He Came Into the World* (which I

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haven't seen), but this straightforward, undeniably contemporary rock track is an effective summation of the gifts of the singer/songwriter/guitarist. Drawn from his soundtrack to that 90-year-old horror movie, "Bad News" out of context operates as a ne'er-do-well's break-up song. The narrator begins with a sad acknowledgment ("Bad news / That's all I bring to you") but follows it with a mystical explanation, as if he's cursed rather than responsible for his failings: "Something in the stars / Says that we are through." On a foundation of synthesized strings but built with the standard guitar/bass/drums materials, the song's real draw is Francis' voice, full of feeling but shaded – a dawning self-awareness held at bay by anger and disbelief. (Available at [BlackFrancis.net](http://BlackFrancis.net); listen [here](#) .)

**Klaxons, "The Same Space."** Over two albums, the British band Klaxons has produced no fewer than 10 *really* good songs, all with the same basic aesthetic: energetic, poppy, propulsive, slightly psychedelic, slightly punky dance rock. Looser, more fun, and more adventurous than Bloc Party (whose *Silent Alarm* was one of my favorite records of 2005), Klaxons make music that's catchy but built for discovery. On "The Same Space," I focus my ears on one element (the vocal harmonies, for instance), but they keep getting distracted by the other goings-on. There's something interesting in every nook and corner. (Listen [here](#) .)



**Lissie, "Record Collector."** Rock Island native Lissie Maurus (now based in California) broke out over the past two years with a pair of Daytrotter.com sessions and the EP *Why You Runnin'*, but none of that prepared me for the accomplishment of her debut album, *Catching a Tiger*. Her expressive and charismatic voice was never in doubt, but the record represents a great leap forward in both songwriting and production. Among several standout tracks, "Record Collector" is my favorite, building on light clanging percussion and its clever play on the title: "But my blue eyes / Cannot see / That their real hue / Is probably green / I should keep records / of these things." It detours into a slowed central section recounting a conversation with God that gives way to a fevered plea, her voice and the instruments racing back to the chorus – where the words' initial regret has blossomed into confidence. (Listen and download

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**The Chapin Sisters, “Boo Hoo.”** An ethereal, odd juxtaposition of the childish, often mockingly used title and a sophisticated, earnest vocal treatment of the phrase – simple in concept and lyrics yet complex in its enigma and effects. There’s an unobtrusive, piano-based musical setting, but the voices of Abigail and Lily Chapin are mysteriously alluring in their phrasing and harmonies, creating a tension between immaturity and adult concerns.

(Listen

[here](#)

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**Arcade Fire, “Suburban War.”** *The Suburbs* is showing up on a lot of best-of-the-year lists, and I won’t argue. This, with “Rococo,” is my favorite track from the record, a lovely, poignant, and exact mix of conflicting emotions. Wistfulness dominates from the triple-guitar opening and the vocal tone, but there are hints of regret and anger and triumph, too. It sounds nearly too vague, like experience twice filtered – a memory of a memory of growing up – but it’s verbally and sonically specific enough to work wonderfully.

(Listen

[here](#)

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**Joanna Newsom, “81.”** *Have One on Me*, the triple album from the idiosyncratic singer/songwriter/harpist Joanna Newsom, might be her most accessible work, but I found it overwhelming. I prefer Newsom in small bits, and as naked as possible; her vocals and harp by themselves cast an intoxicating spell. So I’m partial to the brevity and simplicity of “81,” which is as pastoral as its opening metaphor: “I found a little plot of land in the Garden of Eden.” Newsom keeps the oddness of her phrasing in check, but that voice and harp remain unmistakably exquisite, evocative, and ancient.

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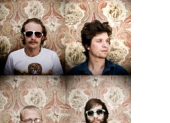
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