



Kid Ink ★ ★ ★ Full Speed

Colourful, attractive and ultimately skin deep. It doesn't just describe Kid Ink's myriad tattoos; it more or less sums up his third album too. The Los Angeles rapper keeps the beats bouncing and the lyrics light on these 15 cuts, welcoming the usual roster of VIP cameos (Chris Brown, R. Kelly, Usher, etc.), hired-gun songwriters and producers (DJ Mustard, Featherstones, more) who favour midtempo beats and artfully measured backdrops that accentuate his fluid flow. But even if he is moving at full speed, he isn't exactly making bold strides forward.

Dengue Fever ★ ★ ★ 1/2 The Deepest Lake

No still waters here (despite a song with that title). These female-fronted Cambodian-rock Angelenos change course for their fifth album of original material, moving beyond their '60s-style Khmer and garage-band psychedelia — and into a world where Latin rhythms and percussion jam with growling soul-revue horns and rap vocals. Go with their flow.

Butch Walker ★ ★ ★ Afraid of Ghosts

You have to confront your fears. And on his seventh solo album, rootsy singer-songwriter and superstar producer Walker does it head-on. Reining in the more outgoing elements of his musical personality, Walker dims the lights to ponder life, love, loss and the death of his dad with the help of VIPs like Bob Mould, Johnny Depp and producer Ryan Adams. Haunting and heartbreaking.



Fifth Harmony ★ ★ ★ Reflection

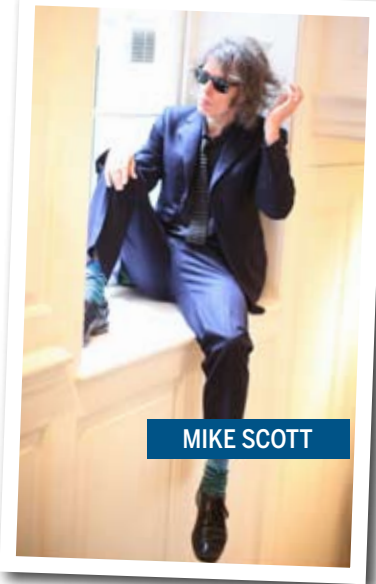
Your reflection, of course, is not an original. It's a duplicate — a perfect, reversed copy of reality. In some ways, it's hard not to suspect the same of *Reflection*, the mostly decent debut from new pop queens Fifth Harmony. On the surface, the disc deliberately and convincingly mirrors the much-welcomed wave of female empowerment currently overtaking contemporary pop, with songs that celebrate successful women, sisterhood and self-reliance (Sample lyric: "Michelle Obama, purse all heavy gettin' Oprah dollars") — while still making time to hit the club in a tight dress and heels to flirt with that cute boy. And it's admirable that the quintet consists of self-proclaimed



album of the week

"minorities" with real-world bodies instead of "perfect little blond-haired, blue-eyed Barbie dolls," to quote the members. But before we start handing out the Women of the Year awards, it's only fair to look at the other side: The group was assembled by Simon Cowell on *X Factor*. Their songs are mostly written and produced by the usual cadre of mostly male Scandinavian hitmakers and faceless hired guns. And while these tunes are decidedly catchy, they're also fairly derivative, seldom

straying beyond the comfort zones of dance-pop, hip-hop and Beyoncé-inspired R&B. Granted, it's still early days for Fifth Harmony, so we'll have to wait and see if they end up being independent women or just the next here-today-gone-later-today pop trifle. For the moment, though, reflect on this: There are far worse albums your teenage daughter — and you — could be listening to. More power to them.



The Waterboys ★ ★ ★ ★ Modern Blues

Blues? You bet. Modern? Not so much. Granted, Scottish singer-songwriter Mike Scott sounds more up-to-date than on his last album of songs inspired by the poetry of W.B. Yeats. Even so, Scott's 11th release is nothing short of classic American folk-rock, southern soul, and yes, blues — performed with Nashville session cats and topped with Scott's Dylanesque vocals and poetic lyrics about rock 'n' roll heaven, Jack Kerouac's road and women who marry the wrong guy. Released in the U.K. this month, it's not due here until April — but it's worth the import price.

Gaz Coombes ★ ★ ★ Matador

Growing up in public is never easy. But Gaz Coombes has done a better job than most. Now 38, the former frontman of cheeky teenage monkeys Supergrass continues to age gracefully on his second solo release. Reining in his mischievous tendencies and glammishly nostalgic bent, he once again expands his Britpop songcraft by incorporating spacious Radiohead experimentalism, claustrophobic Kraftwerkian motorik and more. Bully for him.

Father John Misty ★ ★ ★ ★ I Love You, Honey Bear

Father and husband. Like many newlywed artists, singer-songwriter Joshua Tillman turns much of his sophomore album into a love letter to his spouse. Unlike other artists, however, the former Fleet Foxes drummer and irrepressible smart-aleck poison-pens his esoteric indie-pop and country-folk odes with references to bodily fluids, prophecies of doom, pathetic confessions and enough acidic sarcasm to make a hipster cry. Grin and bear it, honey.

Bob Marley & The Wailers ★ ★ ★ 1/2 Easy Skanking in Boston '78

Jammin'? Oh yeah, they're jammin'. Reggae icon Marley and his Wailers are in fine form on this previously unavailable (and superb sounding) double-live set from his 1978 *Kaya Tour* — the first of several archival releases planned for what would have been his 70th birthday year. Hits and essentials like *I Shot the Sheriff*, *War*, *Exodus* and *Get Up Stand Up* are present and accounted for, along with lesser-known fare like the title cut — and a DVD (which I haven't seen) of fan-filmed footage and animation. Lively up yourself.

Petite Noir ★ ★ ★ ★ The King of Anxiety

It's a small world after all. And getting smaller. Meet Yannick Ilunga, a 24-year-old South African singer-songwriter whose debut EP seamlessly and stylishly bridges musical worlds. On this hand: The transfixing organic rhythms and circular desert-blues guitars of Africa. On the other hand: The layered electronics and programmed grooves and artistry of contemporary outfits like TV on the Radio and Bloc Party. Tying it all together: His rich vocals, which move from a sonorous bass to a soaring falsetto. More please.

Bettye LaVette ★ ★ ★ 1/2 Worthy

Countless vocalists sing covers. Few claim them the way LaVette does. Like its predecessors, the R&B vet's latest release finds her tackling everything from The Beatles' *Wait* and the Stones' *Complicated* to Bob Dylan's *Unbelievable* — and investing them with all with enough emotion and personality to make them seem like chapters in her autobiography. Bonus points to returning producer Joe Henry, whose supportively unobtrusive approach and tastefully understated house band are LaVette's perfect sympathetic foils. *Worthy* more than lives up to its title.



BRITISH INVASION

Jamie Cullum ★ ★ ★ ★ Interlude

We now return to our regularly scheduled programming. After dipping his toes into original material, electronics and even house grooves, singer-pianist Cullum returns to his roots for his seventh disc. Recording live in the studio with a jazz orchestra, Cullum tickles the ivories, croons standards and belts R&B-based gems from icons such as Ray Charles, Cannonball Adderly and others — with his usual slate of left-field choices from the likes of Hank Williams, Sufjan Stevens and Randy Newman. A welcome return. And a pleasant interlude.

The Charlatans ★ ★ ★ 1/2 Modern Nature

One man's sunset is another's sunrise. It's hard to know which is pictured on the cover of The Charlatans' 12th studio album, but ultimately, it works either way. *Modern Nature* is the soulful English rockers' first disc since drummer Jon Brookes died from brain cancer in 2013, and not surprisingly, many of these songs are mellow and contemplative fare, tinged with bittersweet melancholy. But ultimately, this set is more about carrying on than looking back, as the band regrouped and moves forward from the hazy twilight of loss into the shimmering beauty of a new day.



All We Are ★ ★ ★ 1/2 All We Are

From humble beginnings come great things. Exhibit A: All We Are, a buzzed-about Liverpudlian trio whose understated moniker matches their quietly assured musical approach. Simultaneously chilled-out and warmly enveloping, their debut album's low-impact, fluidly groovy alt-pop will draw you in — and keep you coming back for more — with its narcotizing cocktail of delicately glimmering guitars, soulful falsetto vocals and lightly sanded textures. All's well that starts well.

George Ezra ★ ★ ★ 1/2 Not Wanted on Voyage

Some trips take longer than others. For instance, it took more than six months for singer-songwriter Ezra's debut album to make its way here from the U.K., where it came out last summer. Fortunately, it won't take listeners nearly that long to become attached to the 21-year-old Ezra's preternaturally weathered baritone pipes and the engaging songcraft of lilting reggae and ska-tinged folk-pop hits-in-waiting like *Budapest*, *Lame It On Me* and *Cassy O*. Worth the wait.

Chris Spedding ★ ★ ★ Joyland

You can make a lot of friends in 50 years. Spedding obviously has. The twangmeister guitarist and producer has worked with everyone from The Sex Pistols to Roxy Music — and calls in those favours for his latest album, enlisting old pals like Bryan Ferry, Glen Matlock, Arthur Brown, Ian McShane, Johnny Marr and Robert Gordon to lend a voice or a lick to his stylish surf-rockers, rockabilly raveups and noirish instrumentals. Buy the ticket, take the ride.

Charlie Winston ★ ★ ★ 1/2 Curio City

You're never a prophet in your homeland. London singer-songwriter Winston, for instance, is reportedly much more popular in France than in his own country. It's very possible his fourth studio set will sort that. First off, his tender vocals and bouncy electro-troubadour pop are undeniably catchy — especially on the *Young Folks*-style whistle-pop ditty *Lately*. And he invests these cuts with enough sonic eccentricity and stylistic variety to add breadth and depth to the equation. And pique the average listener's curiosity.



Hayseed Dixie ★ ★ 1/2 Hair Down to My Grass

Do arenas have back porches? If so, that's where you'll find Hayseed Dixie these days. The American Rockgrass parodists turn their attention to '70s and '80s hair-metal and arena-rock on their 15th album in about as many years, a-pickin' and a-grinnin' their way through lickety-split, harmony-rich renditions of *Don't Stop Believin'*, *Eye of the Tiger*, *Final Countdown*, *Livin' on a Prayer* and many more. Don't fear the banjo.

1976 ★ ★ ★ 1/2 Goodbye to the Kingdom of You and I

What a difference a year makes. Especially 1976. Not to be confused with British rockers The 1975, 1976 is a Taiwanese quartet named for the year some of its members were born. But it's clearly not the era that inspired the sound of their elaborately titled seventh album. That would be the '80s — specifically the clangy guitars, dreamy vocals, reverby ambience and prominent basslines of post-punk bands like New Order, The Smiths and Psychedelic Furs. In any case, a pretty good year.

The High Dials ★ ★ ★ 1/2 In the A.M. Wilds

Night time is the right time for The High Dials. And the later the better. Five years after their last studio album, the reconfigured Montreal outfit return with a fifth album that finds them prowling clubland in the wee hours, dialing back their indie-rock and power-pop foundation to flirt with dancier grooves, pumping post-punk basses, woozy psychedelic sonics, and even some soothing dream-folk. They'll seduce you — and more importantly, you'll still respect them in the morning.

Looking for my review of Bob Dylan's new Sinatra tribute disc *Shadows in the Night*? You'll find it online.

In the pipeline

Feb. 17

Carl Barât ★ ★ ★ Let It Reign

Steve Earle ★ ★ ★ Terraplane

Estelle ★ ★ ★ True Romance

BP Fallon ★ ★ ★ Live in Texas

Juliana Hatfield Three ★ ★ ★ Whatever, My Love

Colin Hay ★ ★ ★ Next Year People

Imagine Dragons ★ ★ ★ Smoke + Mirrors

The Mavericks ★ ★ ★ Mono

Kate Pierson ★ ★ ★ Guitars and Microphones

A Place to Bury Strangers ★ ★ ★ Transfixiation

Pop Staples ★ ★ ★ Don't Lose This

Texas ★ ★ ★ Texas 25

36 Crazyfists ★ ★ ★ Time and Trauma

