

an honest-to-aces band that's able to churn out epic concept albums with real staying power, even as its individual members can also change up their style, chameleon-like, to mesh seamlessly with the lofty likes of **Erykah Badu**, **Elvis Costello**, **Jay-Z** or **Al Green**. It takes a prodigious amount of God-given talent, not to mention unvarnished grit, to build and maintain that kind of influence—a mission that drummer **Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson** and rap hero **Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter** took on together more than 30 years ago (props also extend to the late **Richard Nichols**, who brilliantly managed the group's interests for two decades). Released amidst the pre-millennial anxiety of 1999, *Things Fall Apart*, their fourth album, could easily provide a soundtrack for today. The jazzy, **Jay Dee**-produced braggadocio of "Dynamite!" morphs into dueling urgency on "Adrenaline!" with **Beanie Sigel** and **Dice Raw**, and on "Double Trouble" with **Mos Def**, sustaining a mood of funky foreboding that only eases up on "You Got Me"—the Grammy-winning single, spotlighting **Badu**, that put the Roots on the map to stay. Twenty years later, the remastered edition revives the original version of the song, which featured a then-unknown **Jill Scott**, along with remixes and outtakes that only add to The Roots' well-burnished rep as the hardest-working band in hip-hop. It comes packaged with a lush booklet of rare photographs, essays by **Questlove** and **Black Thought**, and a poignant, often hilarious track-by-track commentary written by **Quest**, adding more grist to the underlying, and undying, theme of the album: things may fall apart, but that's when you find out who your real friends are. **Bill Murphy**

Nat King Cole

Hittin' the Ramp: The Early Years (1936-1943) RESONANCE



As far as most of the listening public was aware, the 24-year-old singer and pianist who called himself **Nat "King"**

Cole was a new artist when he logged his first hit, "All for You," on Capitol Records in late 1943. But the Alabama native had already been a prolific recording artist before that—he just hadn't had any luck on the national level. *Hittin' the Ramp*, on seven CDs or 10 vinyl LPs, gathers up 183 tracks going back to Cole's earliest attempts in a recording studio. It's not only the most ambitious release in the history of the exemplary Resonance label, but also a document that redefines Cole's place in American music. Those familiar only with his pop vocal hits of the '50s and '60s, in particular, should seek this out and familiarize themselves with the artist's formative works. Cole—who would have turned 100 last year (he died in 1965)—was a peerless jazz pianist long before he became a vocal star, and this

exhaustively researched and curated set is nothing less than essential in understanding and appreciating his contribution in that area. The earliest side here comes from a 1936 session for Decca, a song called "Honey Hush" cut with the band led by Nat's older brother, **Eddie Cole**'s Solid Swingers. Like many of these tracks, it's a swinging jumper—blues-infused yet still easy-going, with Nat's piano bold and confident. Nat formed his highly regarded **King Cole Trio** the following year, and that's when we hear the music begin to take shape, over dozens of transcriptions, master takes and radio broadcasts—much of it hopelessly rare prior to the release of this collection. Some tracks admittedly bear a novelty flavor, but others—like 1940's "Crazy 'Bout Rhythm" and 1940's "Sweet Lorraine"—make a solid case for the pre-Capitol Cole canon as some of the hottest jazz and blues of its day. **Jeff Tamarkin**

The Kinks

Arthur or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire—50th Anniversary Edition EMI



Think *Tommy* was the only great rock concept album released in 1969? Uh-uh. **The Kinks' Arthur** (or, more fully, *Arthur*

or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire) was released later that year and is every bit as masterful as *The Who*'s entry, even if the American rock-buying public didn't know quite what to make of it at the time. (*Arthur* stalled out at No. 105 in *Billboard*; *Tommy* climbed to No. 4.) It wasn't the Kinks' fault—the album received mostly glowing reviews, but the band had been kept from touring in the U.S. for three years when it was released, and was only just rebuilding its fan base. Those who did discover it at the time heard a gripping, sprawling tale based on relatives of **Ray** and **Dave Davies** who'd relocated to Australia; the story touches on war, British class distinctions and much more, in songs that later became Kinks classics—among them "Victoria," "Australia" and "Brainwashed." The new box is stunning: It includes, on four CDs, the original stereo and mono mixes of the album, as well as numerous additional tracks, demos, rehearsals and related recordings that became what's now known as the "lost Dave Davies album." While the so-called "doo-wop" remixes are mostly disposable, true fans will savor the included 7-inch singles, the info-packed 68-page book and various pieces of ephemera (poster, photos, etc.). The Kinks themselves always swore by the quality of the music on this release; like *Village Green Preservation Society*, which came before it and also got an extravagant makeover recently, this celebratory package finally gives *Arthur* its due. **Jeff Tamarkin**

The Band

The Band CAPITOL/UME



Even more than its predecessor, *Music From Big Pink*, **The Band's** self-titled sophomore album from

1969 seemed to arrive from another time and place. Where *Big Pink* went against the psychedelic grain so prominent in 1968 by maintaining a simplicity and sparseness, *The Band* felt like it had stepped into the late-1960s directly from the late-1860s, from Elliott Landy's Civil War-reminiscent photographs to **Robbie Robertson's** songs that spoke of folks named **Virgil** and **Jemima**, failing crops and the quietude of the "Whispering Pines" and a good ol' "Rockin' Chair." Fifty years after its release, *The Band* sounds neither retro nor modern—it stands on its own, as perfect a rock-related album as any ever released by anyone. The late **Levon Helm**, who shared primary vocal duties with the two other deceased members of the classic group, **Rick Danko** and **Richard Manuel**, once said that the vocals were inspired by the gospel-informed soul of the **Staple Singers**, and it shows—there's a near-holiness to these songs, even if they are all basically secular in nature, and a level of musicianship that is as rare today as it was then. Capitol wisely didn't choose to gussy up the package for its re-release. While there is a choice, as is common today, between "Super Deluxe" (with Blu-ray, vinyl, hardcover book, etc.) and less-ornamented versions, the 50th anniversary packages don't overly fuss. The larger release includes a half-dozen alternates and early versions of songs from the album on one CD, and seven more on the second disc, which houses *The Band's* Woodstock set. None of this bonus material (including a lone outtake, "Get Up Jake") substantially alters what *The Band* is all about; and although the 45 RPM 12-inch vinyl LPs and "Rag Mama Rag" single are nice to have, they mainly serve to reinforce that this album was flawlessly envisioned by its creators and needs no help. **Jeff Tamarkin**

Various Artists

Woody Guthrie All-Star Tribute Concert - 1970 MVD VISUAL



This all-star concert took place at the Hollywood Bowl, three years after **Woody Guthrie** died of Huntington's

disease. It was a one-night stand, produced by Emmy Award-winning director **Jim Brown**. The footage has been seen on various PBS stations over the years, but this is its first release on DVD. The singers include an A-list of folkies: **Arlo Guthrie**, **Joan Baez**, **Pete Seeger**, **Country Joe McDonald**, **Odetta**, **Richie Havens**, **Ramblin' Jack Elliott** and **Earl Robinson**. There's also narration by **Will Geer** and **Peter Fonda**, who read from Guthrie's diaries and collected writings. The setlist is drawn from Guthrie's hits—"This Land Is Your Land," "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee)," "The Sinking of the *Reuben James*"—songs most listeners will be familiar with, and there are no surprises or hidden gems from his massive catalog. The performances are all good, but none of them stand out as unique or noteworthy. The film quality is adequate, but not up to modern standards, with a handful of close-up shots going in and out of focus. The sound quality is also adequate, but it isn't anything special. The highlights are Guthrie's words, as read by **Fonda** and **Greer**. His journal entries are full of wordplay, with some of the entries sounding as musical as his best lyrics and melodies. There's bonus footage of interviews with **Arlo** and **Elliott** as well as additional songs and rehearsal footage. Unfortunately, the archival clips that accompany the prose segments are often just as generic as the performances of Guthrie's songs. **J. Post**



The Band