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[Top 11 Independent Releases of 2009](#)

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A man who prided himself on mediocrity once said, “I hate my records. I don’t know what I like.” That sentiment rings true to me as I sift through the desolation left by the year of some people’s lord, 2009. All the major trends of the aughts have dried up: garage rock, emo, alt.country, all that horrid post-punk revival junk. All of the heavy hitters this year have either: a) not released anything; b) released something mediocre and dull to my brain (Sonic Youth, Mission of Burma); or c) recorded for a major label (Wilco, Decemberists, Yeah Yeah Yeahs). What to do? The last year of each passing decade has been noted for its musical fertility, but this one seems oddly dry.

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Still, there was just about enough on the fringes to entertain me. Here are, in no particular order, 11 albums that I think are worthy of notice.

1. **Magnolia Electric Co., *Josephine***

Ever felt as far away as the Kentucky Moon or lonesome as the world’s first ghost? Do those similes appeal to you? Then *Josephine* may be your album of the year just as it may be mine. Smooth, melodic, country slow dances full of mood and romance, sometimes fragile like “I Fall to Pieces,” other times powerful like

“Southern Man.” Each song strives to hit the same forlorn note, true, but the mournful “Rock of Ages,” the romantic “Shenandoah,” and the old-timey folk “Whip-Poor-Will” represent new highs in Jason Molina’s songwriting. The only sad bastard album of 2009 worth a damn.

2. Condo Fucks, *Fuckbook*

Yo La Tengo pretend to be a veteran punk rock band from Connecticut so they can bash out another covers album free of expectations. Short, brutal, unapologetically crude, and, if you’ve only heard the Yo La Tengo studio albums, you wouldn’t believe that Ira Kaplan could scream as well as he does. The song selection is fairly obscure and thus only exciting to die-hard fans and record collectors, but covers of Richard Hell and Slade are more than welcome. The most I’ve been entertained by a recent Yo La Tengo record, which might speak more for my silly taste than the quality of the band’s output.

3. Grant Hart, *Hot Wax*

Remember in *Escape from New York* when everyone kept telling Snake they thought he was dead? In a way, that’s what this album feels like. Whereas Bob Mould’s album this year was pretty much standard fare for him, Hart’s long absence makes him look fresher in comparison to his former songwriting partner. It also helps that these are some of Hart’s best solo songs since “The Main” from his first post-Huskies album back in the late ’80s. There’s the fuzzy rock he was known for, but there’s also acoustic balladry and piano driven pop a la The Zombies. Hart’s vocals are also in top form, like the man hasn’t aged a wink. Maybe the best thing to come from a Minnesota elder statesman all year with all respect due to Westerberg, Mould and that other Bob.

4. Ben Nichols, *The Last Pale Light in the West*

Whether this can be considered an independent release is debatable; Lucero’s Liberty and Lament label was founded on a rather revolutionary deal that let the band own the album but with a major label distributing it. Let’s call it a half and half and then talk about how great this album really is. A concept album based on Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, *Last Pale Light in the West* made me smitten enough to visit the source material, an accomplishment taking into account my questionable literacy (thank you, Catholic education). It’s also a pretty bad ass piece in its own right; “The Kid” proves Nichols’ worth as a narrative songwriter once and for all, while the title track and “Toadvine” hit some downright cinematic emotional highs. My favorite may be “Davey Brown” though; Springsteen ought to listen here to see how a western-themed song is done well. Or maybe to some Alice Cooper.

5. Fiery Furnaces, *I’m Going Away*

Those who want the longer, more involved song structures and stories of *Blueberry Boat* will be sorely disappointed. Live, the group is a rather raw and moving post-hardcore band, Matthew Friedberger being a superiorly dissonant guitar player and Eleanor Friedberger being an absolutely commanding female vocalist. Comparisons to the Patti Smith Group do crop up and *I’m Going Away* doesn’t do much to shirk them. The songs are shorter, more of them have actual choruses, and the electronics are emphasized less. The shift from the abrasive title track to the mellow and mid-tempo (but still weird) “Drive to Dallas” perfectly encapsulates this band’s bit. Rather than fade like so many other popular indie darlings from the first half of the ’00s, the Fiery Furnaces have used this album and 2007’s *Widow City* to further cement their reputation as one of this decade’s most worthwhile oddities, a nice pair of slacks for the emperor some may say. The fact that *I’m Going Away* is less *A Quick One While He’s Away* and more *The Who By Numbers* doesn’t speak ill of the Fiery Furnaces at all.

6. Lemonheads, *Varshons*

Yet another cover album, this time from that guy everybody treats like the Ryan Adams of the ’90s. Evan Dando returned to sugary pop-punk with 2006’s *The Lemonheads*, but this one doesn’t burn rubber in the least. Instead we get reminded that Dando liked Gram Parsons first with a cover of “I Just Can’t Take It Anymore”, as well as countrified versions of tunes by GG Allin, Wire, and the Crucifucks. Also, you get an

odd synth pop cover, Liv Tyler singing a Leonard Cohen song (because Dando knows famous pretty people), and, the crown jewel, an emotional reading of Christina Aguilera's "Beautiful." Sure, that last track plays the same trick that catapulted Dando up the charts with 1992's Gen-X remake of "Mrs. Robinson," but, eh, it was a good trick and someone ought to give the same treatment to "Genie in the Bottle." Ironic Britney covers are passé; bring on Xtina! The polar opposite of the Condo Fucks album in sound, but just as much fun.

7. Polvo, *In Prisms*

Polvo is back! And they're playing slower! And mellower! And they sound kinda like prog and classic rock! As you could guess, fans of *Today's Active Lifestyles* and *Celebrate the Dark Ages* may not be thrilled with this new release. But, dammit, the guys are in their 40s now and trying to beat their former selves at the punky noise would have been fruitless, if not downright embarrassing. Some I applaud this mature work and remind those keeping score that Polvo never rested much on their laurels anyway. In fact, this might have the new Built to Spill trumped in the lengthy guitar epics category. Recalls the slower, guitar-centric stuff that SST was putting out in the late '80s.

8. Black Hollies, *Softly Towards the Light*

Who else cherishes their Nuggets box set? The Black Hollies definitely do. Since its inception, what began as a side project for the now-defunct post-grunge outfit Rye Coalition (a group that was better than the average bear at heavy, screaming noise) has always had roots firmly entrenched in that rather narrow '60s garage rock sound. Whereas 2008's *Casting Shadows* saw the group delve deeper into sitar-driven psychedelia a la the Brian Jonestown Massacre, *Softly Towards the Light* trades their double guitar attack for a prominent organ and a decidedly more soul-oriented approach. Don't misunderstand though, the gritty rock and roll is still here and Justin Morey still has a great voice, recalling everyone from Ray Davies to Ken Stringfellow. The Black Hollies are homage artists all the way, but if you like the same music they do, this is an easy recommendation. The scary thing is that their live show dwarfs their albums substantially.

9. Mark Kozelek, *Lost Verses Live*

I've always thought that Kozelek's "Katy Song," which first appeared on one of two self-titled Red House Painters albums in 1993, was one of those great songs that must've been born of some legit and deeply felt anguish or life experience. I've heard that Kozelek considers it his best song and rightly so. *Lost Verses Live* might have the single best performance of it that I've heard and, considering how it seems impossible for Mark to screw it up ever and how gripping the studio version is, that's a mighty fine thing. As a bonus, the majority of the songs here are culled from last year's *April*, arranged as intimate solo readings. Given a song with melodies as strong and stories so tragic as "Lost Verses," "Moorestown," and "Unlit Hallway," and you get Kozelek at his absolute best. You still have the wacky Modest Mouse covers to wade through, as well as a woefully morose "Send in the Clowns," but even those have some grotesque appeal.

10. Micah Schnabel, *When the Stage Light Goes Dim*

Two Cow Garage's Micah Schnabel likes to play throaty rock and roll in a kick ass Replacements/Springsteen-influenced band, but doesn't like the hipper-than-thou portion of his audience nor will he let the fearful slackertude of his generation pass without a round of scathing bile. If you're pissed off at everyone you know, listen to "American Static." If you think the indie rock scene should get the Ray Davies treatment, try "Cut Me Mic." Want to drink a woman off your mind? I can heartily recommend "Throwing Rocks at the Sun." An intense cover of the Replacements' "Can't Hardly Wait" compliments the rest perfectly. A great acoustic counterpoint to Two Cow Garage's normally loud palate.

11. Blood Warrior, *Darlin' Eyes*

Creepy-sounding folk music. Don't listen to this in an isolated, wooded area or you may find yourself being crept upon by some mysterious stranger with a Leatherface complex.

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