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## Best gift discs they might miss (best music of 2009)

There are a lot of fantastic books, albums, DVDs, and other things that any music fan would love to get this year, but may not know that they would love them yet. The pop culture pie hole is insatiable, and with the battered economy not everything I loved got the proper hype. This is Part One for me, the recorded sound segment.

When it comes time to buy stuff for friends (Christmas Eve, at Easy Street, Sonic Boom, or in my next installment, the Fantagraphics Store), you might see bundles of the below spilling out of my weary arms (if I haven't mail ordered extras already).

**Paranetical Girls**, *The Scottish Play: Wherein The Group Paranetical Girls Pay Well-Intentioned (If Occasionally Misguided) Tribute To The Works Of Ivor Cutler*

Eight super-short "tracks," half spoken word with light keyboard texture, words by a salty old Scotsman who knew the Beatles and couldn't stand loud pop music. Just out on Tomlab, floating as a ten inch in Europe, I can't stop listening to this Portland band's delightful devotion to Cutler's astonishing writing. PG singer Zac Pennington's voice has never been better (my wife insists he's Colin Meloy murdered by a sailor-lover and returned to earth as a perfect-crooner angel), and the spirit of play and precision for these cranky odes to doughnuts and coffins, environmentalists in leather boots pissing in ditches and thus forever changing the eco-system, men losing their lunch to the dismay of their socialite wives, and the triangle of hair we all think about but don't talk about and so Zac must sing about. Got to tell you, I don't think pop music ever gets more brave or adorable.

**X-Ray Spex**, *Live @ The Roundhouse London 2008*

There was a recent picture in SPIN of many of the old punk rock icons, and I won't name names, as a lot of them look like zombies from the next brain-fueled splatter-flick. The freshest-looking gal, who looked like she started her band in 2007 not 1977, was Poly Styrene, whose commitment to a fairly rigid Eastern religion may have killed her new wave social life in the 80s, but apparently kept her pristinely preserved. Big time evidence of this testimony can be found on the eagerly longed-for reunion of her band X-Ray Spex, in a glorious pink and black combination CD/DVD collection which shows the (probably first) feminist-punk singing her anti-consumerist, anti-intoxicant, anti-materialist, anti-patriarchy manifestos with the same vengeful, perky charm she had on their immortal debut *Germ-Free Adolescents*. Opening with one of the biggest girl snarls ever recorded (and now just as powerfully rerecorded), "Oh BONDAGE! Up Yours," and howling and punk-popping out some of the best and weirdest protest songs ever (for example, "I Can't Do Anything," which the Hernandez Bros. loved enough to devote a couple of pages of their *Love & Rockets* comic to their proto-riot grrrrl character's singing). She never gets out of breath, and the band isn't trying too hard to keep up either. One of the essential purchases most effectively arguing for a world of less, um, purchases.

**The Tripwires**, *House To House*

Where have all the great new albums gone? The ones with songs you replay till they wake up with you, that sound so good they're on endless iPod repeat on the bus, and then you can't help crank before finishing that final beer of the night? The Minus Five's Scott McCaughey believes that The Tripwires' John Ramberg is "the world's most underrated songwriter" and considering McCaughey himself released three solid 'A' records of his own this year, a full-length dozen of Ramberg's songs recorded with Johnny Sangster (Mudhoney, Makers producer),

Monday, December 14, 2009  
by [Chris Estey](#)

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### The Walkabouts

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the same fifteen covered by Walter Salas-Humara, The Minus 5, Steve Wynn and Linda Pitmon, and yes, even Jon Langford (on a hilarious, tremendous reggae redux of "Christmas Island"). The Willard Grant Conspiracy take on "The Bitter Tree," all spiny and doomed, the make-over of "Unholy Dreams" from chamber rock into Pixies anthem, and the return of also-underrated Pacific NW bar-room visionary Terry Lee Hale (with "The Seattle Clams," eh wot?) are really quite stunning. This is where to begin with The Walkabouts, for sure.

### D.O.A., *Kings of Punk, Hockey, And Beer*

They invented hardcore, before "crossover" and the suburbs infected it with "personal pain." In fact, leader Joey Shithead is such a stoic, when he stayed at my group house in 1985, he stopped me from hitting after-show party-goers with a plank I was carrying around. I had just lost a very important part of my body that day (seriously). I told him this, and he told me to buck up and stop whining about it. I have never stopped loving D.O.A., even when the records weren't that exciting. Which was long ago. Like great bluesmen, this Vancouver-based punk rock band are exactly this album's title.

### Betty Davis, *Is It Love Or Desire?*

Very nervously, as I was once her publicist and already risk accusations of helping my ex-employers with this mention (so this is brief). But seriously, Light In The Attic found a missing masterpiece by a woman who created punk-funk, poured her heart into this boundary-crushing autobiographical album, and so few websites and magazines covered it? When I was at LiTA, the former Mrs. Miles Davis' final record wasn't even thought to exist. It became available this year, completely blowing the minds of fans, but no one else, it seemed, got the story? Good Lord.

### Half-handed Cloud, *Cut Me Down & Count My Rings*

Forty-six Jesus Freak on spiritual speed songs, spinning out into infinity, filled with love and light and some cosmic drip from the espresso machine of the angels. What do you call this music that Sufjan Stevens' pal John Ringhofer makes? Holy-core? Best buy for those into the sacred and the strange. There's like two double albums worth of singles, EP tracks, etc., all collected on to one relentless, riveting platter of personal vision. Awesome, and a little scary.

### Daniel Johnston, *Is And Always Was*

This is the first Johnston album that really impressed me almost all of the way through. And those details about his life meant nothing as I listened to it. I appreciate his struggles, but these are just really good songs, fully embracing joy and love, and taking a wizened view at those hacking it out ("Fake Records of Rock and Roll").

Caveat: This is all stuff within the past three-six months. I'm sure there were lots of great records earlier this year, too, and the minute this is posted will drive me insane for not listing them as well! Thanks for your time.

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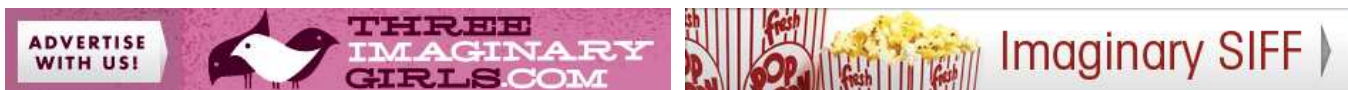
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