

Other critics' top music picks

Our contributing music writers name their five favorite albums of the year.

1. Natacha Atlas: "Ana Hina"

(World Village)

Until now, global diva Natacha Atlas was known for her visionary fusion of Arabic sounds with electronica. This sumptuous album, however, finds her in an acoustic mode, focusing mostly on Arabic songs from the '50s and '60s—the golden era when legendary singers such as Fairuz and Abdel Halim Hafez recorded a treasure trove of lush pop gems. Atlas' reinterpretations are sensuous and elegant.

2. Aterciopelados: "Río"

(Nacional)

Steeped in sweet psychedelia and an all-encompassing mystical vibe, the latest Aterciopelados album confirms the Colombian duo of singer Andrea Echeverri and bassist Héctor Buitrago as one of Latin rock's most transcendental outfits. If only other bands could mature with such grace and impeccable taste.

3. Bombay Dub Orchestra: "3 Cities"

(Six Degrees)

This British duo's sophomore effort is probably the best chill-out album of the year—a highly cinematic tribute to Bollywood mystique and traditional Indian music. One listen to standout track "Strange Constellations" is enough for its hypnotic keyboard line to crawl under your skin and never let go.

4. Marillion: "Happiness Is the Road, Vols. 1 & 2"

(MVD Audio)

The nocturnal atmospherics of vintage Pink Floyd are very much alive in the soundscapes of veteran British group Marillion. If 2004's *Marbles* was the quintet's ultimate art-rock masterpiece, the double-disc "Happiness Is the Road" offers a sprawling chiaroscuro canvass of moody guitar riffs and Steve Hogarth's melodramatic vocalizing.

5. Julieta Venegas: "MTV Unplugged"

(Sony/BMG)

Fans of Venegas' earlier work were understandably disappointed when the Tijuana chanteuse made a switch from edgy alternative rock to a more commercial sound. But Venegas could sing the Yellow Pages for all we care. The delicately layered arrangements of this "Unplugged" session underscore the most gorgeous voice in all of Latin pop—luminous and inviting.

—Ernesto Lechner

