

Rolling Stone

Our Critics Top Albums of 2003

Strokes, Shins and a whole lot of OutKast



Feelin' the love

This year, the diverse blend of hip-hop, funk and soul -- not to mention comedy -- found on OutKast's *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* dazzled sufficiently to top our annual critics' poll. Andre 3000 and Big Boi's sprawling two-CD set appeared on eight lists, just one more than *Chutes Too Narrow*, the second release by brainy indie rockers the Shins.

Despite the hype surrounding the two of the biggest "The" bands since the Beatles and the Stones, the Strokes and the White Stripes pulled in fewer votes for their respective 2003 releases (four) than did the latest offerings from grunge godfather Neil Young and long under-appreciated power-pop outfit Fountains of Wayne (both with five).

Other favorites ran the gamut from the late, great Johnny Cash, to prolific hip-hop phenom Missy Elliott to newcomers bearing the flags of yesteryear: southern rock (Kings of Leon), prog-rock (the Mars Volta) and folk rock (Damien Rice). Clay and Ruben may demand a recount.

BILL HOLDSHIP

1. **The Raveonettes**, Chain Gang of Love (Columbia): Three-minute blasts of sugary trash rock glory, post-shock treatment, all in B-flat major. If rock is dead, rigor mortis sounds awfully good here.
 2. **Kings of Leon**, Youth and Young Manhood (RCA): Quirky and catchy, bad haircuts and all. So quirky and brilliant, in fact, that the throwaway hidden track is actually this year's finest ballad.
 3. **Paul Westerberg**, Come Feel Me Tremble (Vagrant): Less another midlife crisis downer than, quite simply, his best batch of new rock tunes since the Replacements' *Pleased to Meet Me*.
 4. **Rodney Crowell**, Fate's Right Hand (DMZ/Epic): Defiantly and proudly a "midlife crisis" album -- but uplifting, hopeful, and beautiful enough to be perhaps his greatest work ever.
 5. **Lucinda Williams**, World Without Tears (Lost Highway): Joins Crowell in offering the first examples of country-fied rap. Not as good as she thinks she is -- but still damn good.
 6. **Neil Young and Crazy Horse**, Greendale (Reprise): What a crazy, lovable, funny, rockin' old hippie coot. His best since *Ragged Glory*.
 7. **Carlos Guitarios**, *Straight From the Heart* (Nomad): Survivor sleeper of the year from the guitarist of L.A.'s beloved Rhythm Pigs. The Chuck Berry-in-N'Awlins "Damn Atchafaylaya" opener is about as happy as they come.
 8. **Johnny Cash**, *Unearthed* (American/Lost Highway): God bless him.
 9. **The Strokes**, *Room on Fire* (RCA): Friends who adored the debut don't seem to like this much -- but if you weren't totally awed by the first, this one may do the trick. Definitely a distinct sound.
 10. **Fountains of Wayne**, *Welcome Interstate Managers* (S-Curve/Virgin): Not as good as the first two albums (or *That Thing You Do*, for that matter), but still the power-pop champs of 2003.
- Reissue: **Television**, *Marquee Moon* (Rhino): Forget those trendy Grateful Dead comparisons. This was punk rock, pure and simple, when it still had something to do with art.

TRACY E. HOPKINS

1. **OutKast**, *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* (Arista): Instead of breaking up, the duo fused Big Boi's *Speakerboxxx* and Andre 3000's *The Love Below* as one delicious package.
 2. **Meshell Ndegeocello**, *Comfort Woman* (Maverick): After 1999's somber *Bitter* and 2002's fiery *Cookie: The Anthropological Mixtape* Meshell finally gets happy on the reggae-splashed *Comfort Woman*.
 3. **Erykah Badu**, *Worldwide Underground* (Universal): No other neo-soulster keeps fans captivated like Badu; she continues to cast her spell.
 4. **Missy Elliott**, *This is Not a Test!* (Elektra): Irreverent, sentimental, funky, and foul-mouthed. No one combines those elements as entertainingly as Missy.
 5. **R. Kelly**, *Chocolate Factory* (Jive): R. Kelly's sex life may be suspect, but his classic soul-sprinkled *Chocolate Factory* is undeniably sweet.
 6. **Stiffed**, *Sex Sells* (Cool Hunter): With a yelp recalling Dale Bozzio, Santi White -- who penned *Res'How I Do* -- proved black girls can rock.
 7. **Cherrywine**, *Bright Black* (Dcide): Former Digable Planet Ishmael Butler showed he's still cool like that with his new, funk-rock-rap band Cherrywine.
 8. **Kenna**, *New Sacred Cow* (Sony): Thanks to Chad Hugo of the Neptunes, Kenna's nostalgic debut recalled the angst of the Cure and Tears for Fears.
 9. **Ruben Studdard**, *Soulful* (J): He was overshadowed by *American Idol* runner-up Clay Aiken, but with *Soulful*, champ Studdard reclaims his title.
 10. **Donnie**, *The Colored Section* (Motown): Anchored by his rich, Stevie Wonder and Donny Hathaway-reminiscent vocals, this newcomer made an impressive debut.
- Reissue: **Michael Jackson**, *Number Ones* (Sony): While Jacko is clearly troubled, this hits collection reminds us that he's also extremely talented.