

Pop Life

by Danny Hooley

Pop Life's Top 10 Albums of '97

The Pop Life" Top 10" simply consists of the albums that I considered to be the best last year: the most challenging, the most durable and the most consistent. The hardest part of doing this is the weeding-out process; I must have bought and listened to at least 50 excellent albums in 1997, and choosing only 10 for a best-of list is not easy.

Although at least four genres are represented below, I worry about giving any of them short shrift. For instance, some readers may notice that there are only two hip-hop albums and one R&B album on the list. There's also a jazz album, an electronic dance album, and five rock albums.

But I promise you, this does not reflect a belief on my part that rock music is superior to other forms; I love all music, and I based my rankings on the criteria I stated above. I regret that my list omits albums by R&B stars Janet Jackson and Mary J. Blige, country singer John Anderson, world music artists The Klezmatics and Oumou Sangare, and rap albums by Soul Assassins, Latyrx and Gravediggaz, because I enjoyed them all a lot. They just didn't make the cut.

Plus, there's no way I can buy and listen to everything, you know? I'm pretty sure I missed out on quite a few good records simply because my time and resources are limited. So take this column in general for what it is: a sincere attempt to tell people about good music that I've heard. And now, without further ado ...

1. SLEATER-KINNEY - *Dig Me Out (Kill Rock Stars)*

This young lesbian trio from Olympia, Wash. reminds me of why punk rock changed my life 22 years ago. Like the pioneers of that movement, Sleater-Kinney seems determined to blow up the world with every three minutes-or-under song. So the hooks just keep on coming, the singing sounds pissed off, the lyrics are full of urgency, candor and sarcasm, and the seemingly crude (but, actually, thrillingly inventive) guitars slice out their very own turf. They've got something to say, and *somebody's gonna listen*. Exciting stuff, and it's the best rock I have heard all year.

SLEATER-KINNEY DIG ME OUT

2. YO LA TENGO - *I Can Feel The Heart Beating As One (Matador)*

Husband-and-wife team Georgia Hubley (drums, vocals) and Ira Kaplan (guitar, keyboards and vocals) have been doing this for over a decade now, and with the addition of bassist James McNew a few years ago, they've continued to get better. Yo La Tengo is all about pure aural beauty: guitars that sound warm whether they shimmer, buzz or scream, folky melodies and vocal harmonies, and psychedelic effects. You might have guessed from that description that they evoke the 60s. They do, down to their cover of the Beach Boys' "Little Honda." But Kaplan's guitar playing has a voice of its own, and the songs sound like no one else's.

3. DOC CHEATHAM & NICHOLAS PAYTON (Verve)

Jazz legend Cheatham, 91, teamed up with acclaimed newcomer Payton, 23, last year for a dual trumpet session of well-known tunes played New Orleans-style. Both soloists burn, and Cheatham's relaxed vocals add charm to a classic recording.

4. SPRING HEEL JACK - *Busy, Curious, Thirsty (Island)*

The second album by England's premiere brainiac electronic duo is as brilliant as their 1996 debut, *68 Million Summers*. The instrumental music of Spring Heel Jack is at times funny, at other times ominous, and at all times beautiful and mood-altering. They're fun enough for pop culture types, and cerebral and talented enough for jazz (and maybe even classical) fans.

5. PAVEMENT - *Brighten The Corners (Matador)*

They're one of the mainstays of guitar rock on college radio, which means their popularity is steadily waning in that fickle environment. Still, not many bands on independent record labels manage to maintain the level of excellence that Pavement has for over half a decade: five great albums in a row. This one has the usual wry, brilliant lyrics and passionately played tunes. There are also some Sgt. Pepper-era Beatles touches, which I suppose is their way of wittily signifying musical "maturity."

6. BABYFACE - *The Day (Epic)*

You can tell he's a child of the '80s: he only put 10 songs on this album, as if vinyl was still the main medium. But hey, at least it's short on filler. Sexy, soulful, and stronger every time I hear it, *The Day* was the best R&B album of 1997 for my money.

7. SPEARHEAD - *Chocolate Supa Highway (Capitol)*

This hip-hop album stood out from all others in 1997. Spearhead leader Michael Franti is a plain speaker with revolutionary politics who doesn't couch his messages in a lot of razzle-dazzle. That's not to say he isn't an impressive rapper, his deep voice and easy style remind me of Gil Scott-Heron, and his lyrics demand that you think. Like KRS-One, he's not playing the gangster, he's spreading knowledge. Unlike KRS-One and many others, Franti doesn't bother much with boasts. As for Spearhead's sound, imagine Sly and the Family Stone with a reggae touch. *Chocolate Supa Highway* creates a compelling sonic environment.

8. CORNERSHOP - *When I Was Born For The 7th Time (Luaka Bop/Warner Bros.)*

This English band led by a young Indian fellow who honors his musical heritage makes irresistibly funky and hooky world pop. I dare you to deny "Brimful of Asha," or well over half of the album's other songs, for that matter. Look out for these guys in the future.

9. BOB DYLAN - *Time Out Of Mind (Columbia)*

Welcome back, old guy. Dylan's voice and humor both regained an edge that made his new album his best in two decades. It also helps that Daniel Lanois' production style is so gratifyingly unfashionable. I hope The Rolling Stones are paying attention: unlike them, Bob came off so uncool last year that he looked *cool*. You know what I mean?

10. THE NOTORIOUS B.I.G. - *Life After Death (Bad Boy)*

I avoided this album for a long time because I wasn't sure I could make a good critical judgment so soon after the tragedy of Biggie's death. But it only took a few recent listenings to convince me that this album is as classic as his first, and maybe even more definitive. He was so funny, warm and self-deprecating he could get away with playing murder and misogyny for laughs. Not only that, but when he got serious, which was rare, you believed him. He also brought out the best in Puffy Combs: theirs was one of the great partnerships in music history. And recording a two-hour rap album that sustains for about 18 out of 22 songs is very impressive. He really was pretty great, wasn't he? Judging from all the guest appearances on this album, a lot of his peers seemed to think so. I'll be missing him.

Clinton says 'Encore' to University Jazz Ensemble

Tomeka D. Ruffin
Staff Writer

Performing once for the White House's annual Christmas gala was not enough for North Carolina Central University's Jazz Ensemble.

Their performance was so well-received that they were invited back to play for a second time.

The Ensemble's first performance for the White House staff (who were joined by congressional aides and congress members), was on December 9.

On December 15 the students found themselves once again performing for a White House audience, which included members of the national press.

The Ensemble played festive music such as "The Christmas Song" as well as jazz standards by such composers as Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn for the Christmas receptions.

After the Dec. 15 performance was over, the students were given the opportunity to talk with the president.

Dr. Ira Wiggins, director of the Ensemble, said that the president seemed to really enjoy the jazz compositions, and spoke with the students for approximately 20 minutes.

"He was very down to earth," said Wiggins. "It was more like talking with another musician rather than the president of the country."

Wiggins also said that at one point during the discussion, Clinton talked with an Ensemble vocalist who was a single mother concerned with financial issues surrounding a college education.

Wiggins said that Clinton was genuinely concerned with her comments and hugged the young mother when she broke down in tears.

Jonovan Cooper, a senior music major and saxophone player for the Ensemble said that visiting the White House was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

"We were all surprised," said Cooper. "We felt good about it and we were pleased to be invited."

Cooper said that playing at the White House was the highlight of his student career at NCCU.

Chancellor Chambers said the Ensemble's performance at the White House had him in high spirits.

"We are very excited," said Chambers. "The Ensemble's invitation to the White House is helping to give NCCU major recognition throughout the nation."

Wiggins said he believes that the Ensemble's nationwide exposure will boost recruitment efforts for the university and the music department in particular.

"We have already begun to receive numerous calls from



NCCU Jazz Ensemble Director Dr. Ira Wiggins talks shop with saxophonist Bill Clinton after a Dec. 15 performance by the Ensemble at a White House press reception.

students who want to attend the university because of the Christmas performances," Wiggins said.

Wiggins and Chambers both say that the Ensemble's White House performances will enhance the reputation of the music department and of the university.

NCCU Jazz Ensemble singer recounts visits to White House

by Bria Culp
Staff Writer

Editor's note: The following is NCCU Jazz Ensemble vocalist Bria Culp's account of the Ensembles recent White House performances.

"I met the president!"

Whenever I made that statement, after returning from Washington, D.C. last December, it was always met with disbelief and very little excitement by friends.

Almost everyone I told said the same thing: "Yeah, right!"

But it was the truth. No one could believe that I had gone to the White House to sing with the Jazz Ensemble for the president, and returned in time to take my last final exam. But I did.

In fact, we received rave reviews from members of the White House staff for our Dec. 9 performance, and less than a week later, we were asked to perform at an upcoming press reception in the White House's East Room, where the president holds press conferences. Cameras from many Triangle area television stations filmed our departure as we left a second time for D.C. on the morning of Dec. 15.

This time, we got lost in D.C. trying to find the church where we were to get dressed for our performance, which meant that we had very little time to get dressed once we found it.

Later, at the White House, we performed in the East Room for familiar faces such as Sam Donaldson and Larry King. Afterwards, a friendly

White House page named Cricket came in with a big smile on her face and said, "We're going to do something fun! We're going to meet the president."

We posed for a picture with the president, and later we sang "More Than You Know," a jazz tune which the president told us was his favorite song.

The president was very personable: he discussed saxophones with our director, Dr. Wiggins, and day care reform with Ensemble vocalist Elizabeth Lawson.

I was still excited when we left D.C., and as soon as I got back, I knocked on my best friend's door to tell her, "I met the president!"

And do you know what she said? "Yeah, right!"

Review: Lox's debut has flavor, but be wary

THE LOX - *Money, Power & Respect (Bad Boy)*by Douglas G. Johnson, II
Staff Writer

Fresh off the fame from Puff Daddy's hot single "It's All About The Benjamins," and the late Notorious B.I.G.'s dark single "Last Days," The Lox ("Living Off Experience") brings a hardcore edge to the Bad Boy record label with its debut LP *Money, Power & Respect*.

The group members (Sheek, Styles and Jadakiss) hail from Yonkers, N.Y. Their rugged/jiggy (hip-hop jargon for smooth or cool) flavor offers listeners the entire contemporary hip-hop spectrum.

Some songs that stand out as potential radio-friendly hits are the current single "If You Think I'm Jiggy," the Puff Daddy-produced track featuring singer Kelly Price, "So Right," which revisits Cheryl Lynn's classic roller skating anthem "Encore," and a tribute to The Notorious B.I.G., "We'll Always Love Big Poppa."



The Lox have strong underground appeal: the group is already familiar to many rap fans. Besides the aforementioned singles with Puff and The Notorious B.I.G., The Lox have appeared on many mix tapes, on which they spit out the type of rimes that hardcore hip-hop fans enjoy.

They've brought some of that flavor to *Money, Power & Respect* with songs like "Goin' Be Some S***" (stylish braggadoccio), "The Heist (Part I)" (a tale of robbery), and "Let's Start Rap Over" (a trip down hip-hop memory lane).

Guest appearances on the album include L'il Kim and DMX on the title cut, and Puff Daddy rapping on the future club anthem "Can't Stop, Won't Stop."

Although the masses of hip-hop heads will find *Money, Power & Respect* a pleasant ice-breaker for the new year, listeners should be wary of the continuous, degrading name-calling directed at black men and women on this album. The Lox definitely display artistic mic presence, and most of their beats are phat, but *Money, Power & Respect* lacks the messages of positive empowerment most of its listeners need to hear.