

The year in albums: Ten favorites from 2010

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There is much to be said for the sheer variety of good (and popular) albums from 2010 - maybe it's a sign of a growing globalized musical worldview among the listening public, or perhaps an increased interest in certain less-appreciated genres of music. Whatever the trend may be, listed below are ten of my favorite albums from the past year (in no particular order). Some may be out of left field, while others might be pretty predictable to some, but they're all outstanding albums in their own right.

There are plenty more noteworthy releases to choose from, and the choice was a difficult one, to be sure. The list below, therefore, is by no means exhaustive, though it covers a broad range of styles, and hopefully it will spur some more musical exploration.

Have any of your own favorites? Sound off! The TechNews staff are always excited to hear about more music, movies, or other works of note from the past year, or those yet to come.



The Sword - *Warp Riders*

They may not 'dress' metal enough, or 'act' metal enough in public, but The Sword is a metal band; and they simply rock, even if it can be a bit tongue-in-cheek. Their latest release moves away from fantasy themes to an epic sci-fi story, with a concept just as epic-seeming and instrumentation that's only improved with time. Heavy enough to appeal to metal fans, while rock-heavy enough to appeal to the casual listener, *Warp Riders* does not fail to deliver.

Wavves - *King of the Beach*

Rumor has it that surf-inflected rock is on its way out as far as musical trends go. With Wavves' latest effort, it's difficult to imagine that being the case. Unlike his previous efforts, self-recorded with bargain-basement equipment (and probably in a basement, come to think of it), *King of the Beach* is a full-on studio effort with a backing band, and rather than looking too polished or too detached, the result is a very good listen.



Owen Pallett - *Heartland*

Pallett has kept much of what made him unique during his Final Fantasy days, but everything on this album is grandiose. The concept album about a violent farmer in a fantasy world, controlled by a curious narrator and eventually conscious about the fact, is a lofty idea on its own. Paired with the Czech Symphony String orchestra and the St. Kitts' Winds, it's full of bombast. Couched in all of this, the album still maintains a strong pop sensibility (no small feat itself).



The Arcade Fire - *The Suburbs*

After the success of their debut, *Funeral*, The Arcade Fire's second album seemed like a let-down - it was good, but couldn't quite compare. With *The Suburbs* (an album about just that - suburbia), the band not only walked the tightrope between making the lyrical content either too detached or too histrionic, but they showed they can incorporate a variety of influences, from the down-tempo to the almost-punk numbers this album's soundscape spans. The result is a deeply satisfying listen from start to finish.

Titus Andronicus - *The Monitor*

After their debut right around the turn of 2009, Titus Andronicus wasted no time resting on their laurels. They took their sound (one part Springsteen-esque rock, one part instrumental bombast, and a liberal sprinkling of adolescent insecurity) and polished it without diluting any of what made them so addictive in the first place. Those qualities include their raucous instrumentation, incorporating horns, and lyrics that veer from darkly humorous to despondent, with occasional poetic interludes. *The Monitor*, therefore, just feels like another step for a band that started out good and just keeps getting better.



The Black Keys - *Brothers*

The Black Keys are not only prolific in their releases, but also willing to play around with their core sound - originally straightforward blues-rock, now a tougher beast to pin down exactly - that they avoid sounding repetitive. *Brothers* is a return to form in some respects, but showcases a few tricks from the two core members' side projects, their more out-on-a-limb previous album, *Attack & Release*, and incorporates subtle echoes of that into their ultimately satisfying fuzzed-out blues rock sound.



Crystal Castles - *Crystal Castles*

After the controversy surrounding accusations of plagiarism and not actually playing their music, Crystal Castles had a lot to prove with their second official release. Could their brand of chiptune-heavy, abrasive electronic music rise above the scandal? The answer is yes. Not only has the album held up, it's managed to sneak in gentler pieces along with what fans have come to expect, showing off an evolution in musical tastes that only serves to enhance Crystal Castles' intensity and existing sound.

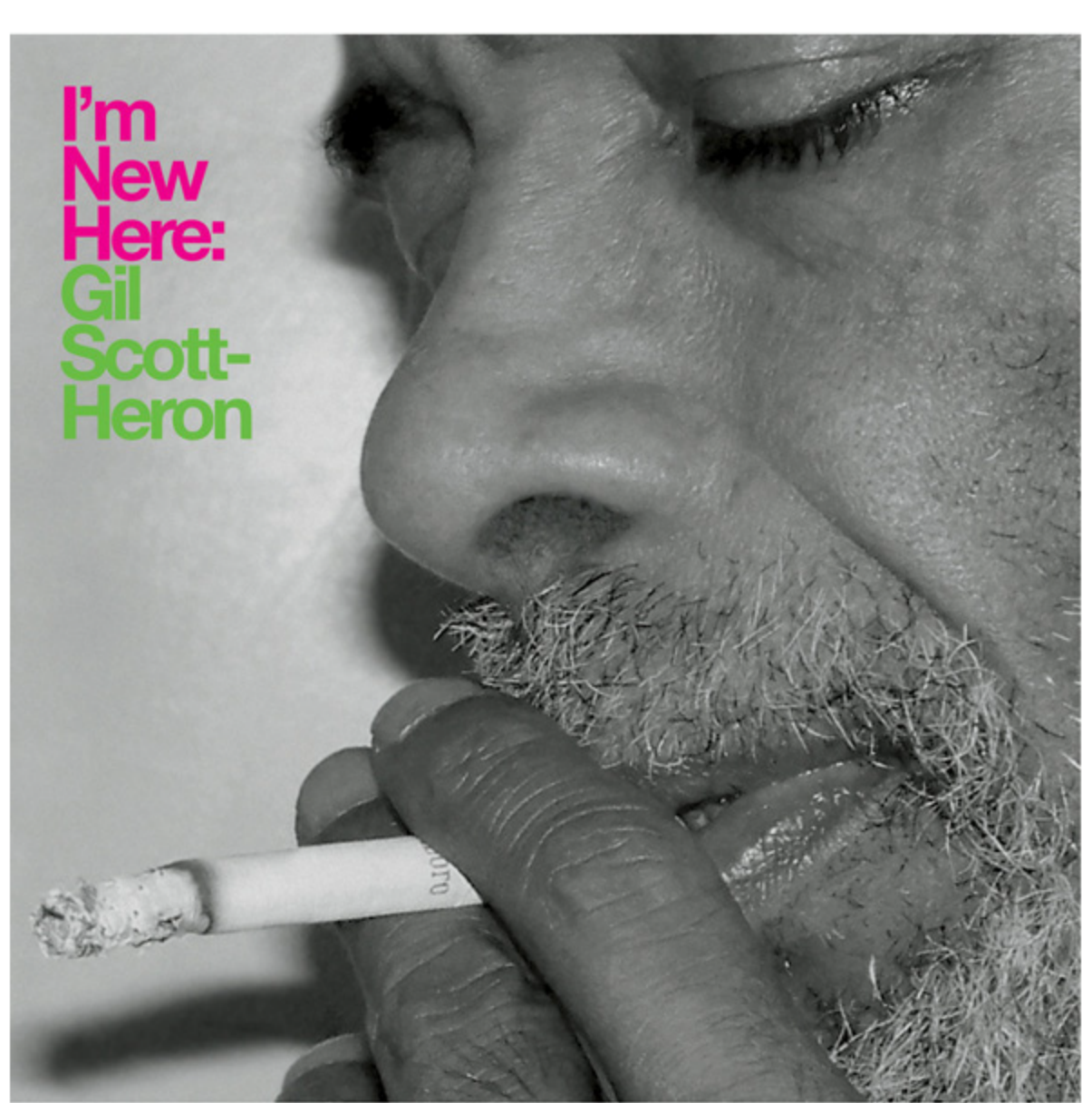
Das Racist - *Sit Down, Man*

Back in 2008, when their single "Combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell" came out, Das Racist was in danger of being consigned to the realm of joke rap. Thankfully, two mixtapes, of which *Sit Down, Man* is the more robust, proved to the world that yeah, they could be irreverent, witty, or just plain weird; however Das Racist has a way of sneaking some serious agitating into their songs, and if the name is any indication, race and its related stereotypes are a major theme. The result is one of the more unique pieces of rap to come out of 2010.



Janelle Monáe - *The ArchAndroid*

Janelle Monáe has an amazing voice, a fresh approach to R&B, and perhaps more conspicuous than all that; an eye for the avant-garde. Her debut full-length is a continuation of a story begun in her EP from 2007, *Metropolis: Suite I: The Chase*, a tale of a romance between a human and android in a futuristic art-deco-meets-science-fiction setting. While the almost-prosaic content centers around 'otherness' and the echoes of racial attitudes inherent in the metaphor are hard to miss, making the album not only grand (with its orchestral interludes), but full of depth, as well.



Gil Scott-Heron - *I'm New Here*

Gil Scott-Heron has come a long way from his "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" days - both literally; traveling abroad due to a distinct lack of appreciation by US authorities for his support of black militant movements in the 70s, and figuratively; a struggle with drug abuse and watching hip-hop, a genre he's been credited with helping pioneer, become nearly unrecognizable. *I'm New Here* emerges as an honest and disarmingly personal account of his struggles and his pride, a distinct blend of spoken word and blues-inflected soul that only he could pull off.