



Critics' Top Ten Lists

From Ambulance to the Zutons, our favorite albums of 2004

DOUG WATERMAN

1. **Ron Sexsmith**, *Retriever* (Nettwerk): This guy probably comes up with melodies in his sleep. Each remarkable album somehow beats out the previous album. The best singer-songwriter out there.
 2. **Charlie Mars**, *Charlie Mars* (V2): Easily the most addictive album of the year. Soaring pop/rock from a Southerner who's here for the long haul.
 3. **The Killers**, *Hot Fuss* (Island): Hooks galore, these guys naturally go from a Cure-ish vibe to mainstream power-pop appeal and make both elements relevant and captivating.
 4. **Jesse Malin**, *The Heat* (Artemis): Queens spokesman follows up seminal debut with equally majestic follow-up, fusing keen, city-life poeticisms with witty realism.
 5. **Julie Roberts**, *Julie Roberts* (Mercury): South Carolina-bred soulful crooner takes mainstream country to another level with beautifully cohesive writing, song selection and interpretation.
 6. **Drive-By Truckers**, *The Dirty South* (New West): The best of three Southern rock epics from one of the most gutsy, genuine bands in music today.
 7. **Todd Snider**, *East Nashville Skyline (Oh Boy)*: **Initially I was skeptical and strangely standoffish of this raw recording, but, as a Snider fanatic, I came around to witness its inherent splendor.**
 8. **Grant-Lee Phillips**, *Virginia Creeper* (Rounder): A perfectly crafted and executed batch of Americana that indeed transports the listener to an earthier, more substantive place.
 9. **J.J. Cale**, *To Tulsa and Back* (Sanctuary): Acting like not a single day has passed since his 1972 debut, the unassuming swampy, bluesy, jazzy, folky, funkster (and everything else) troubadour bears his best here.
 10. **The Thrills**, *Let's Bottle Bohemia* (Virgin): More coherent than their highly touted debut, the follow-up from these Irishmen boasts "Not for All the Love in the World," a gorgeous lyrical soundscape.
- Reissue: **Pavement**, *Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain* (Matador): One of the greatest albums of the Nineties. Pavement made it OK to be sloppy and sing off-key, but somehow everything came together with undeniable finesse.