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Who says 2005 was a bad year for new music?

NORTHAMPTON, Mass. On Christmas Eve, I ran into the owner of a local record shop -- a knowledgeable and enthusiastic musicologist whom I hadn't seen in over a year. He was quick to tell me how disappointing 2005 was for new releases and was anxious to know which of 2005's CDs I favored. One by one I started to recall the collections that stood out, the ones that kept finding their way back to my CD player, the records that provided moments of joy and inspiration, that ultimately served as the soundtrack to my year.

The store owner listened intently, agreed with some of my choices, frowned at a couple and took notes on the few that he hadn't heard. I realized at that moment that although critics' top 10 lists can be annoying or provocative (often both), they ultimately serve the purpose of sharing our passion for music, which is what brought us to write about it in the first place.

Below are 10 pieces of music that will forever remind me of how important music is to my life -- and hopefully to yours as well.

1) Chip Taylor & Carrie Rodriguez -- "Red Dog Tracks" (Train Wreck Records). Taylor is a wise and wizened songwriting veteran, best known for penning "Angel Of The Morning" and "Wild Thing," two of the most disparate pieces of American '60s pop one could imagine. About 40 years later his muse has been rejuvenated after hiring the young and unheralded Carrie Rodriguez to play fiddle for his band. Some musical chemistry ensued when he discovered her then untapped singing talents. Two disparate voices join together along with some exquisite songwriting to make a quietly passionate, rootsy masterpiece.

2) Caitlin Cary & Thad Cockrell -- "Begonias" (Yep Roc). Another terrific pairing of male and female voices-Cockrell is known as a singer-songwriter who "puts the hurt back in country music," while Cary made her mark as second fiddle to Ryan Adams in his renowned-but-short-lived Americana outfit Whiskeytown. Cockrell and Cary's collaboration recalls the grand tradition of illustrious gal/guy country duets -- George & Tammy, Johnny & June, Conway and Loretta and especially Emmylou & Gram.

3) Winterpills -- self-titled (Signature Sounds). Over the brutal winter of 2003, Pioneer Valley singer-songwriter Philip Price found some inspiration and some friends to create delicate, shimmering and haunting pop music. When Flora Reed added her

voice a year later, magic ensued and eventually this intoxicating debut.

4) Various -- "Big Sweet Life -- The Songs of Jon Dee Graham" (Freedom Records). A reverent tribute to the Lone Star State's version of Tom Waits also serves as a fundraiser for his young son who has a rare degenerative bone disease. Includes a vibrant live concert CD featuring the likes of Charlie Sexton, Alejandro Escovedo and James McMurtry covering Graham's soulful and spiritual songs plus a bonus DVD of terrific rooftop performances, including Patty Griffin's stunning version of "Faithless," which in my humble opinion is worth the entire 15 bucks.

5) Eliza Gilkyson -- "Paradise Hotel" (Red House Records). This reflective, mature and political follow-up to her 2004 Grammy nominated "Land of Milk and Honey" continues to document the under-appreciated Austinite's post-age-of-50 songwriting roll.

6) James McMurtry -- "Childish Things" (Compadre Records). Another Austinite on songwriting roll, the son of novelist Larry McMurtry has a nasty attitude and a sharp eye for character and is at his snarling, dissatisfied best. His anti-Bush rant "Can't Make It Here Anymore" was adopted by lefty Bernie Sanders as his 2006 campaign song.

7) Dave's True Story -- "Nature" (BEPOP Records). Post-modern lounge for the NPR crowd. Dave Cantor's flair for Bacharach-like melody and Randy Newman-esque lyrical wit coupled with Kelly Flint's gorgeous, Peggy Lee-like vocals make for an enchanting mix.

8) Beck -- "Guero" (Interscope Records). Beck puts the fun in funky and the art in smart.

9) Otis Taylor -- "Below The Fold" (TELARC). Hypnotic, tough and innovative modern blues, by the WC Handy Award winner.

10) Lucinda Williams -- "Live at the Fillmore" (Lost Highway). For those, like me, who prefer their Lucinda raw and unvarnished.

Honorable Mention: Amy Rigby -- "Little Fugitives," Paul Kelly & The Stormwater Boys -- "Foggy Highway," Kathleen Edwards -- "Back To Me," John Hiatt -- "Master of Disaster" and The Alejandro Escovedo String Quartet -- "Room of Songs."

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