

half-whisper. As the title suggests – a cheeky pun from “I’m Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter,” another Waller cover – McCartney also revels in the lyrical wit. “We three/We’re not a crowd/We’re not even company,” he sings on “We Three (My Echo, My Shadow, and Me),” a hit for the proto-doo-wop vocal group the Ink Spots. Context also adds humor: See the 1926 standard “Bye Bye Blackbird,” which always vied with McCartney’s “Blackbird” for the species theme song.

Remarkably, aside from some acoustic guitar, Macca doesn’t touch an instrument. The ensemble is led by Diana Krall, a jazz-pop pianist who now has a track record of wooing British rockers – like Elvis Costello, her husband. With some A-list jazzbos (including drummer Karriem Riggins), the group complements McCartney’s playfulness while trying to steer clear of corn. Krall’s cozy swing animates “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” and even “The Inch Worm” is rescued from the kindergarten curriculum. Cameos imprint the two McCartney originals, which hold their own. “My Valentine” recalls Cole’s take on “My Funny Valentine” and features supple acoustic guitar by Eric Clapton. The slow dance “Only Our Hearts” is brightened by a Stevie Wonder harmonica solo.

There’s an irony here: The Beatles played a big role in permanently confining this style of pop to the margins. And if McCartney doesn’t bring much beyond his beloved timbre to these melodies, there’s a lovely honesty to the set, which reads in part as a love letter to Nancy Shevell, the new Mrs. McCartney. One imagines, had things played out differently, her hook-loving husband might have wound up doing just this: happily playing standards, with miles of charm, for whomever turned up at the pub.

Key Tracks: “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” “My Valentine”

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Lana Del Rey’s Tedious Torch Songs

The self-proclaimed “gangster Nancy Sinatra” puts on a snoozy seductress act

Lana Del Rey ★★ *Born to Die* Interscope



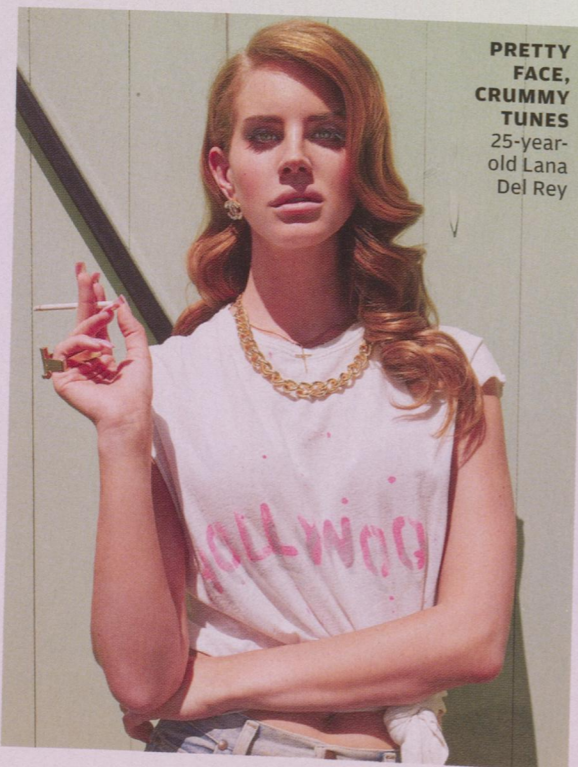
Give Lana Del Rey credit: At least she didn’t break down and cry on *Saturday Night Live*. She’s a starlet to music bloggers, who’ve been buzzing over her for the past year. But for the rest of us, she’s just another aspiring singer who wasn’t ready to make an album yet. Given her chic image, it’s a surprise how dull, dreary and pop-starved *Born to Die* is. It goes for folky trip-hop ballads with a tragic vibe, kinda like Beth Orton used to do. Except she could sing.

Her strength is the lyrics, which have the pop-trash perversion that the music lacks. The big theme: femininity as a scam, as lost girls preen for the gaze of imaginary sugar daddies. (Loads of *Lolita* references, though her literary template seems to be Poison’s “Fallen Angel.”) She has clever lines; in “Diet Mtn Dew,” she rhymes “Take another drag, turn me to ashes” with “Says he’s gonna teach me just what fast is.”

But her voice is pinched and prim, and her song doctors need to go the fuck back to med school. As any fan of Madonna, Britney or Steely Dan could tell you, lyrics about the perils of seduction work better when attached to seductive tunes. In case you miss the concept, “Without You” spells it out: It’s all about “the dark side of the American dream.” But American dreams are tempting, which is why they’re dangerous. Unfortunately, this one is neither.

Key Tracks: “Video Games,” “Diet Mtn Dew”

ROB SHEFFIELD



PRETTY FACE, CRUMMY TUNES
25-year-old Lana Del Rey

Wilco ★★★★★^{1/2}

iTunes Session *dBpm*
The Whole Love reheated, with sides



This live-in-studio set remakes highlights from 2011’s excellent *The Whole Love*, a

homespun survey of Wilco’s avant-garage skill set. Changes are subtle – guitar noise is rearranged on “Dawned on Me,” strings are dialed back on “Black Moon” – and sometimes barely discernible. More illuminating are the revisions of two older songs. Ten years and two long wars later, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*’s “War on War” is more grizzled, with guitar convulsions trumping synth convulsions, and *A.M.*’s “Passenger Side” sounds like a post-rehab honky-tonk cautionary tale. A cover of Nick Lowe’s “Cruel to Be Kind,” with the songwriter himself handling lead vocals, also sticks close to the original. No wheels reinvented here, but they all roll pretty good.

WILL HERMES

Key Tracks: “Passenger Side,” “Black Moon”

Howlin Rain

★★★★★

The Russian Wilds *American*
San Fran kids romp through a psych-rock time warp



The third album by this Northern California band is a raucous tangle of vintage blood-

lines: the long-ride improvising and earthy-blues stomp of the Bay Area’s Fillmore-dance-party age. *The Russian Wilds* is also singer-guitarist/leader Ethan Miller’s determined surge forward through that past. The evocations in “Self Made Man” and “Strange Thunder” of early Santana, Humble Pie’s heavy soul and the cosmic-campfire harmonizing of Crosby, Stills and Nash are propelled with bracing studio clarity and hot-live-gig immediacy. The inspirations and pot-dream idealism may be retro; the zeal and momentum are not.

DAVID FRICKE

Key Tracks: “Self Made Man,” “Strange Thunder”

TOP SINGLES

streaming
males ★★★★★^{1/2}
“Means Nothing”

break the curse
show you what
“worth” declares
Patermister on
washing jam from her
upcoming Ugly LP
her voice to
demon-meets-
roar
launching a guitar
storm. WILL HERMES

M.A. ★★★★★^{1/2}
“Girls”

polished highlight
Vicki Leekx
rides a slinky,
wood-style Danja
and the key line flips
script: “I
handle on it/My life,
broke it.” As anthems
empowered
go, surprisingly
hololy. W.H.

Rinaldo

“The Wall”

hard not to read the
youth guitarist’s
solo joint as a reck-
ing with SY founders
Moore and
Gordon’s marital
“These days are so
certain,” Rinaldo sings.
with Wilco’s Nels Cline
him pool out
serenely pretty,
his future sounds
sured. JON DOLAN

Madou and
Liam ★★★★★^{1/2}
“Bogou Badia”

land, meet Brook-
Santigold and the
Yeah Yeahs’ Nick
get down with
Afro-pop ambas-
sadors, and the ladies
the mics while the
plow fields with
electric guitars. If
jam at the
went on for 10 more
minutes, there’d be no
complaints here. W.H.

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Springsteen

Springsteen’s State of the Union Address

Bruce Springsteen ★★★★★ “We Take Care of Our Own”

Anguish and challenge run thick and fast in the first single from Bruce Springsteen’s election-year missive, *Wrecking Ball* (due March 6th). “I been stumbling on good hearts turned to stone,” he laments, assessing a nation exhausted by economic straits and locked in an uncivil war of values. Later, there is a reference to a still-dark stain on our honor: the black and poor abandoned to sweaty, feral hell in the Superdome during Hurricane Katrina.

The broken promises actually come with contagious déjà vu: a streamlined pop of synthlike counter melody, like “Dancing in the Dark” hung over with disappointment. Stubborn faith takes over in the final choruses. “Wherever this flag’s flown/We take care of our own,” he sings amid street-church voices. It is the sound of a guy who believes democracy isn’t about percentages, 99, one or otherwise. It’s all for one – or it will be all for nothing. DAVID FRICKE

BOOTLEG

Guns N’ Roses
Conseco Fieldhouse, Indianapolis, December 8th, 2011

In 2001, Guns N’ Roses, the incarnation featuring Axl Rose and Buckethead on lead guitar, kicked off their *Chinese Democracy* tour. Strangely enough, it’s still in progress, even though it’s gone dark for years at a time and the *Chinese Democracy* LP landed with a thud in 2008. That’s not to say that GNR put on a lousy show. This Indianapolis gig, which went on for nearly three hours, features a killer set list of all their hits. Rose’s voice sounds so incredible, if a fan were to hear this performance of “November Rain” without any context, he might think it was



Rose

from the *Use Your Illusion* tour. In the past, GNR skipped their material from those 1991 albums, but at this show they dug out the epic “Civil War” and “Estranged.” They also played instrumental versions of six classic tunes, including “Another Brick in the Wall Part 2” and “Whole Lotta Rosie,” with guest Zakk Wylde on guitar. Overall, it’s a pretty astounding show. It’s just a shame that so many fans, burned by Rose’s antics, are missing it.

ANDY GREENE

Bonnie Raitt Slides Back

Bonnie Raitt ★★★★★
“Right Down the Line”

The song is Scottish (a cover of Gerry Rafferty’s 1977 hit); the groove is Jamaican (a gentle reggae skank); the percussion is Latin (timbales and conga); and the guitar-playing is classic rock by way of Chicago blues. The singer – and, of course, the guitarist – is Bonnie Raitt, who has been turning rootsy sounds into smart, moving and unflashy pop rock for decades. Like the rest of Raitt’s catalog, this tune from her forthcoming *Slipstream* LP is understated, almost to a fault. But Raitt’s vocal hits just the right note of rueful worldly wisdom – and on her guitar solo, she shreds.

JODY ROSEN

Jack White’s Twisted Heart

Jack White ★★★★★^{1/2}
“Love Interruption”

The solo Jack White doesn’t seem entirely sure what to do with himself, and sometimes – as on this loopy little soul sketch – that’s what makes him eternally interesting. “I want love to grab my fingers gently, slam them in a doorway, put my face into the ground,” the recent divorcé sings, hammering on his acoustic as organ spritz and puppy-eyed Casio bassoon evoke “Son of a Preacher Man.” Nashville singer (and onetime *Sing-Off* contestant) Ruby Amanfu’s harried backing warble fits a song that adds an awkwardly personal wrinkle to the White Stripes’ errant primitivism.

J.D.