



PLAYLIST | Jon Pareles

Working-Class Blues and R&B Royalty

Don't change the calendar yet. This Playlist is the last gasp of 2011, a final handful of albums released through the year that almost got away. Almost.

Sia Tolno

Sia Tolno starts her second album, "My Life," (Lusafrica), released in December, by belting the words "Blamah Blamah" — not an explosion, though it sounds like one, but a remembrance of a festival at a town in her native Sierra Leone that was later leveled by a civil war. Now living in Guinea, Ms. Tolno is a forthright singer along the lines of Angelique Kidjo and Miriam Makeba, ready for leathery exhortations or melting ballad lines. She doesn't mince words whether she's singing in African languages or English: "People they fight here and there for power/killing young and strong men of our land," she sings in "Odju Watcha." Yet her songs ride sleek, complex studio grooves that draw from all over Africa and beyond — Nigeria, Congo, Senegal, the Caribbean — to find pleasure in hard-headed resilience.

Mary Lorson & the Soubrettes

"I've done nothing I'm ashamed of," Mary Lorson sweetly sings, pauses and adds, "lately." It's just one of the sharp moments of clarity tucked into her pristine songs. Ms. Lorson has been leading various bands (Madder Rose, Saint Low) since the 1990s, and she's at her most subtle and telling on "BurnBabyBurn" (Jane Dog Songs), released in August. The music is ethereally folksy. Ms. Lorson's gentle voice, and the ghostly soprano harmonies of the Soubrettes, are usually backed by just a handful of instruments: her piano, a banjo, a pedal steel guitar, rarely drums. But quiet doesn't mean timid. Her words sketch characters and situations in enigmatic glances and flashes of candor, while her graceful melodies promise more consolation than they words they carry.

Etta James

The great R&B singer Etta James has kept her spunk on her most recent studio album, "The Dreamer" (Verve Forecast). The producers include Ms. James and her sons Donto (on drums) and Sametto (on bass), and they've placed her firmly back in the realm of steady-chugging 1960s soul, with churchy organ and a horn section. It mixes vintage songs about desire and romance — "Misty Blue," "Groove Me," Otis

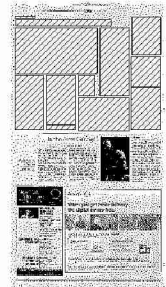
Redding's "Champagne and Wine" — with a few cannily backdated ones: Memphis-flavored versions of Guns N' Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle" and Little Big Town's "Boondocks." Ms. James's voice has grown lower through her five-decade career, and she takes her time in these songs. But her personality sounds undiminished, with long, curvy phrases that are decisive, knowing and, in Bobby Bland's heartsick, disillusioned "Dreamer," bitterly authoritative.

Givers

Nothing less than euphoria will do for Givers, a band from Louisiana that released its debut album, "In Light" (Glassnote), in June. No wonder its first song is called "Up Up Up"; both tempos and sentiments are endlessly upbeat, radiating latter-day hippie optimism and seize-the-day advice like "Don't get stuck in the meantime/No such thing as the meantime." At times the Givers can suggest bands like Yeasayer, Vampire Weekend and TV on the Radio, but entirely stripped of New York City angst and irony. The music affirms joy with globe-spanning grooves: contrapuntal Afropop guitar meshes, Afro-Caribbean bounce, psychedelic reverb, math-rock twists and head-bobbing harmony choruses, with every song charging through multiple sections and rarely looking back. They start out exultant and build from there.

Wye Oak

Gnarled guitars enfold weighty thoughts on Wye Oak's third album, "Civilian" (Merge), released in March. From its beginnings Wye Oak has pondered mortality, family and faith. The band reveres the sparse revelations of Neil Young and reclaims the 1990s indie-rock era of Pavement, Throwing Muses, Yo La Tengo and the Pixies: the unvarnished tone and tenacious asymmetries, the guitar patterns that can be knotty or obstreperous, the modestly delivered but exacting melodies. Wye Oak is a duo onstage — Jenn Wasner on guitar and vocals, Andy Stack on drums and one-handed keyboards — but that's less obvious than ever on "Civilian." Ms. Wasner harmonizes with herself and brings in auxiliary guitars, intricate or distorted; the keyboards join the counterpoint. Where Wye Oak used to rely on grunge's sudden soft-loud changeups, now it has other paths: hovering sounds, gradual swells and additional layers. When a





ALAN MERCER

blast does arrive, it sounds elemental.

The Revelations, Featuring Tre Williams

Old-fashioned soul songs for 21st-century hard times open "Concrete Blues" (Decision/NIA), the second album by the Revelations, based in Brooklyn. Tre Williams writes and sings about unemployment, incarceration and poverty before he moves into equally desperate love songs carrying phrases like: "What you do in the dark/Oh, it sure comes through in the light." Mr. Williams, who grew up in Florida, has the voice for them: a church-rooted baritone that's full of gospel grain and blues ache, and is miraculously free of current R&B's nasal melismas. Wes Mingus's blues-rock lead guitar, terse and assertive, takes over where Mr. Williams leaves off, and the band doesn't rush or fancify the tunes. It's revivalism without poses or quotation marks.



ZACK SMITH

Above, from left, Taylor Guarisco, Tiffany Lamson, Josh LeBlanc, Nick Stephan and Kirby Campbell of Givers. Above right, Etta James. Below, Jenn Wasner and Andy Stack of Wye Oak.



NATASHA TYLEA