

# 2010

## “Dark Fantasy” [edit] Kanye West

Two thousand ten catches me with my feelings a little hurt. As W.S. Merwin observed brilliantly in a poem, “Tell me what you see vanishing and I/Will tell you who you are”; at one of my unfortunate moments of paying attention to “iTunes Essentials,” the vanishometer noticed that 2010 was the first year that could plausibly be said to contain no rock music. Now, when the very last guitarist forgets the chords to “Smoke on the Water,” will I actually weep? I don’t think quite. What I will miss is that rock and roll was that good a participatory ritual. You could join in rock music at whatever your level was, including air guitar, and the world will spend years searching the Internet in vain for something like it. There shall never be air laptop. The Beatles figured out to struggle against their elite genius to somehow Get Back, to somehow Let It Be, but it could not be let be, and now the history that is rock history is played out, and is shutting down. There is no logos that strives forward from *Revolver* to “Teenage Dream.” God is dead. We are back in the land of Pharaoh. And, say it with me, no one man should have all that power. *My Dark Twisted Fantasy* is spiked enough with dazzle, but I don’t love it as much as everyone else; to me when you turn the pugnacious thing and the art-rock thing this far up, what you get is basically today’s Billy Joel album. And just like then, it’s not still rock and roll to me. Though I don’t love it, I like it quite a bit; the chorus has some whizz-bang sonics – check my 1980 pal Mike Oldfield – and I chuckle every time at “How you say broke in Spanish? Me no hablo.” I’m editing out the English accent spoken intro, which it embarrasses me slightly to play to anyone. It’s really Kanye’s videos for this album that most warrant my hard-earned click. The part with the bird woman being terrified when bird is served is an invigorating shocker, and I think Billy Joel would feel good about raising a toast to the douchebags.

## “Drunk Girls” LCD Soundsystem

I’ve been very close to including one LCD Soundsystem track or another for some time, but I always end up thinking no, what I’m listening to is essentially a novelty number I can imagine someone else liking, with not nearly enough going on musically. Worse, they don’t wear well with me. I came the closest to including “North American Scum,” but then stopped being able to fathom what I was thinking, except that I have a bad feeling that if I hear five of your songs, and they’re all grotesquely overlong, and then I hear one that’s a sensible length, I have some tragic compulsion to reward that one. But I’ve

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listened to “Drunk Girls” many times, and I’m ready to say what the hell, I’m way over whatever my beef was when rock wasn’t dead, and I will absolutely take this. It would sure be weird if I was slow to notice that James Murphy and Kid Cudi were actually the people carrying the torch for pop rock.

### **“Bright Lit Blue Skies” Ariel Pink’s Haunted Graffiti**

I don’t remember saying anything negative about the catchiness of any song, but Ariel Pink’s acclaimed “Round and Round” reminds me to add that to get full credit, a catchy musical phrase also has to not be horrible. As Mr. Gru says, “Kidding! Although, it is true.” But the Pink don’t usually have that problem, and I feel safe in saying I like every song on the album except that one, and am happy about the world loving them for stupid reasons, as so often happens. “Bright Lit Blue Skies” is the strongest evidence of their being the weird reincarnation of some sixties-style obsessives with accidental commercial appeal, like maybe the Grass Roots, and of course I mean the Creed Bratton line-up.

### **“Fula Fula” Konono No. 1**

One of the two most important musical experiences since I last wrote here (for 2009) was my first listening party. I didn’t know any of the attendees that well, and I didn’t know what to expect, but it was a rich social encounter that left a deep impression. The host had some beautiful reference-tuned speakers, and the vinyl and digital material we brought all sounded its Sunday best. I came away a convert to several items in the program, including this, which I took to be a fairly obscure Congo artist showcasing creatively amplified thumb-piano. Later I played it for Bradley Skaught, who said, “Oh, that must be Konono No. 1.” Yeah, okay, so apparently Björk knows about them, etc. etc. Screw you all. Oh, my other most important musical experience was when Bradley’s band the Bye Bye Blackbirds played an acoustic set in my living room. There is simply nothing, not even reference-tuned speakers, like three people playing great acoustic guitar and singing great harmony in non-cyber space.

### **“Dynamite” Taio Cruz**

Twenty-ten was a very good year for engaging lyrics if you looked around, and in some ways none captured my attention more than those of “Dynamite.” I hope it doesn’t come across wrong when I say that I’m only a little less taken aback by a grown adult singing, “I’m wearing all my favorite brands” than if he were singing about getting his first cell phone. I know, teen marketing and all, but my point is there’s something so unfiltered about that line that I just have to like it; I do *almost* know what it’s like to feel good because I’m wearing a brand of clothing I like, and if I did, why wouldn’t I want to celebrate and live my life and throw my hands in the air? My five-year-old adores this age-of-Antares anthem even more than I do, which is definitely some; I can only imagine how resonant this will be with her when she is old enough to feel brand loyalty.

### **“Watercolor Day” Seth Swirsky**

As all-powerful as the Internet is, I find it a little hard to point to substantive changes in how music sounds that are direct results. It may be that some alarming percentage of what you hear is actually made on Garage Band, but the goal there is not to be able to tell; no one aspires to that Garage Band sound. Certainly the Internet has changed how

people *find out about* music, and one novelty there for my methods is what I'll call canon triangulation. Searching around for the best new songs, I'll do a web search on several songs that I consider indicators of good ears, and see what else is on those people's list, and so on. I found "Watercolor Day" that way, I think on a site I want to credit with being associated with Audities, though I see I'm not able to repeat the search today. And what a relief that is! Proper following of music has to have a certain amount of fuzzy information or it's too much of an affront to accountability to talk about a song that is merely good. That Savoy Truffle bari sax tag at the end of "It's another watercolor day" is nothing you can blog about, it's just unquestionably satisfying to listen to. Unrelated to my mushy reasons for wanting to refer to his song, Seth Swirsky's long career is, on the other hand, non-stop stuff to talk about, including actually having a song of his recorded by Al Green, and how this career led up to such dexterity with Beatles moves is a mystery I probably have to delve into further.

### **"Me Being Maximum" Agony Aunts**

Genuinely Cole-Porter-clever pop rock lyrics are not common; insufficient success hinges on them, especially with the universe of musical intellectual property in the current state of disarray. This is not a bad specimen for any period, and a fine unexpected addition to my collection of braggadocio art. Once "Me being maximum, you being minimum, we'll be so medium" lodges in your head, it's worse than "hey-yo, gotta let go."

### **"The Suburbs" Arcade Fire**

"So can you understand why I want a daughter while I'm still young?/I want to hold her hand and show her some beauty before this damage is done": the first half of that is some extremely respectable writing (the second half is an important thing to say, but anyone could have written it). I'm not used to listening to Arcade Fire and not wondering what the fuss is, but even beyond the words, this is musically adept, catchy, and very well sung, working that extra Ian McCulloch yawn at the end of words. I still don't get any sort of big lightbulb with the earlier stuff, but go ahead and gloat, long-time fans.

### **"Too Much" [edit] Sufjan Stevens**

I'm guessing that Animal Collective have encouraged some artists with an urge to orchestrate to try doing it with layers of synthesized mess. You sequence, layer, and process the mess and, voila, sometimes not mess. *The Age of Adz*, its ostensible obsession being mentally disturbed artist Royal Robertson, certainly manages to transcend any mere pop influence into becoming its own arguably breathtaking Gaudi cathedral made mostly from unpleasant little sounds; nevertheless, whereas Sufjan enjoys lavish native gifts as an empathic balladeer, he needs a little help from his friends as a symphonic conceptualist. And so, "Too Much" manages a fantastic 7/4 electrocalypso geniuscape before going on too long, kind of like that exotic dream that turns into just having to find a bathroom.

### **"Helicopter" Deerhunter**

Sounding like it could easily be the next song on *The Age of Adz* after freshening up, "Helicopter" reminds me that there are artists out there I haven't paid enough attention to, like Bradford Cox/Atlas Sound/Deerhunter, and this entrancing slow-motion demise of a lost soul with "helicopters circling the scene" indicates there's much to be missing out on.

### **“Running Out” Scissor Sisters**

You can hear the production budget step up here, can't you? This song is the mojo of 1981 perfected, and that's a bargeload of perfecting, no minor touch-up. Pete Shelley, the Pretenders, and our old friend the Bowie who started making best albums since *Scary Monsters* are all standing and cheering, the way I picture it.

### **“Floating Vibes” Surfer Blood**

Jesus? “Forget the second coming, I need you in the here and now/Instead of dreaming up a way to spread your name across the world somehow” is the opening sentiment, which then modulates to resentment at someone leaving, and then to an admonition that the ocean swallowed him fully, and “you'd better learn how to surf.” This is such a stealthily fine little tune with such a stealthily auspicious lyric set that I'm going to let them get away with rather slushy meaning a second time.

### **“Licenses to Hide” The Posies**

Here's one where I insist that you savor what a good *mix* this is. As my wife Kristine would make fun of me for noticing, it sounds like they were using a great vocal mike, and that's often actually a result of how the mixing engineer made it sit. Kristine then calls appropriate attention to the fact that the Posies have ventured into three part harmony, as well as adding a female guest vocalist, all of which sound great, and sound like they were recorded using great microphones. As for the song, the chorus here functions less as a compositional climax than as cinematography, its cabaret overtones a centurywide back-drop against which the verse pops with its treatment of honesty in second act romance.

### **“You Must Be Out of Your Mind” The Magnetic Fields**

The Fields surge once again to music-box-with-twirling-Oscar-Wilde perfection, particularly with the unsurpassable double rhyme of “I want you crawling back to me/On bended knees, yeah/Like an appendectomy/Sans anesthesia.” It's a double rhyme. It's a double rhyme. Oh my God. It's so bright. Oh, sorry, the Internet is influencing me again.

### **“Crash Years” The New Pornographers**

The New Pornographers are the most dependable artists of the last ten years, but as it happens, I first heard this in a Barnes and Noble without knowing who it was. I couldn't get over how odd it was that the song stood out as something I was positive I would like a lot, and I had no idea why, and to this day I wonder. Was it mostly that bass and string groove? I can't think I had time to absorb something to hum, and there's no real stylistic rallying point to it. In Taio Cruz terms, it was like I was throwing my hands up in the air without knowing I was wearing my favorite brands.

### **“Angry World” Neil Young**

Neil Young, who was losing his marbles and putting out inscrutable electronic music when Sufjan Stevens was in diapers, is back to show the youngsters how it's done. Together with the mini grunge revival of its ultracompressed drop-D guitar, “Angry World” is a reminder that Neil's is one of the broadest of musical palettes, and it's one ultra-cool canvas, spilling over with unexpected sonic flavor and innuendo.

### “Baby Lee” Teenage Fanclub

When I get to the top songs of a year, I rein in my tendencies to simply express how incredibly great I think a song is, but there’s an especially strong temptation here. How could that chorus melody have possibly not existed until now? As should be expected from a group who wrote the line “Here is a sunrise/Ain’t that enough,” Teenage Fanclub have remarkable instincts for not dressing a song up too much, which can make them come off plain. It’s downright odd playing “Baby Lee” for someone and expecting them to get excited, kind of like playing them “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” Even the usual electric pop combo chime and harmony are laid aside in favor of what I have to think is deliberate quaintness: “Baby Lee, I am always watching from a distance/Marry, marry me, oh baby, now I am insistin’.” Hold on, that’s half-baked, isn’t it? I couldn’t leave a line like that. I’d have to find scansion that didn’t repeat “marry,” for one thing. Come to think of it, “marry me” would probably have to go, as an offense to my success-free youth market impulses. But what the occasion calls for is for someone to say, it’s obviously already perfect, you can’t change it, at all. It is incredibly great.

### “On a Good Day” Joanna Newsom

It’s easy to imagine this song being long remembered, and, if so, there will be plenty of future surprise at its context, standing out as it does like a tiny Irish Thomas Moore song in the middle of *Have One on Me*, an album built to house nine-minute art rock. I often like art rock, and it’s first-rate art rock; she has something to say at all times, often in abstraction and even Kate-Bush-like parables, and its folk (she plays harp) and jazzy, modernist arrangements impress with a slight astringency at every moment. By track seven, your guard is down for “On a Good Day,” which aims right for the heart. At 1:48, it’s over in a blink, but demands immediate revisitation, especially verse two: “I saw a life and I called it mine/I saw it drawn so sweet and fine/And I had begun to fill in all the lines/ Right down to what we’d name her.” I’m emotional just typing that; what a way with words! I can’t help but think of a miscarriage, but it’s framed as either a central event of a lost love relationship, or maybe even speculative, or maybe even metaphorical. In this, too, I can imagine she’s learned from Kate Bush, who can engage on a couple of levels of interpretation. I ran across Fleet Foxes’ Robin Pecknold playing a version of “On a Good Day” on YouTube; it was wonderful to hear this composition’s clarity of humanity seconded by another remarkable soul who wants to hold our hand and show us some beauty.

