

Dave Hartl's 2015 Top Ten (or so) Most Influential Albums

Another year rockets past. Still listening to music. And it's that time again where we look back and pick out the 10 or so most influential things I heard in the past year. Not the most popular, or even the best, but what made me think the most as a musician.

Last year, we got some great responses on this list from Chico Huff, Kaz Yoshihara, Steve Carl, Jack Loughhead, and Bonnie Wright. I got to hear some really good music from their recommendations. Thanks folks! If you'd like to respond, write to dave@davehartl.com and your contribution will be added to this document online for future downloads. In this way, we all get turned on to great music and cut through the jungle of A&R hype and industry compartmentalization that still remains out there.

These Top 10 lists (going all the way back to 1998, when I started this with George Tucker) are available on my webpage at <http://www.davehartl.com/top10.html> . And if you like to be exposed to some great music, try my monthly online podcast at: <http://www.davehartl.com/perfesserbomb.html>

1.) Weather Report: The Legendary Live Tapes: 1978-1981



I've spent the last four months of 2015 listening intently to the music of Weather Report, reverse-engineering the work of Joe Zawinul into the framework of virtual synthesizers for my next major project, a tribute group called Weather Redux. In the process, I've been stunned by his contributions and have struggled to replicate what he accomplished in this group.

And now comes this 4-disc set, compiled by drummer Peter Erskine from cassette tapes he made at the time. He explains in the notes how the studio albums were created and how, even on the live "8:30" album there was massive overdubbing taking place; these board cassettes are undoctored live representations of what this group could do without studio trickery. And it's a revelation. I saw this group as a

quartet in Phoenix, AZ in October of 1978 and Glassborough, NJ in the spring of 1980, and I always wondered if time and the vagaries of memory had positively flavored my recollection. No, they really were as incredible as I remembered. The proof is here.

This is the year that people seem to be waking up and remembering this group. Wayne Shorter is a true elder statesman and this group was his longest-running commitment in his career. Jaco Pastorius was really the man who redefined the electric bass, his departure opening the door to way too many wannabes that do nothing for me but reaffirm Jaco's preeminence. The release of a biographical movie this fall has underscored his importance. Joe Zawinul is sadly gone, leaving a huge void in the jazz scene – he was the only artist the Jazz Police allowed on synthesizer, an aesthetic/business decision that is absolutely indefensible (and for which I blame the unexplainable dominance of Wynton Marsalis on all things jazz). And Peter Erskine still plays brilliantly, but somewhat under the radar for the mainstream.

Yes, this is the most influential album of 2015 for me just for how it's informing my professional work. But far beyond this, this set is one of the most incredible live documents ever released. If you ever liked this band at all, you owe it to yourself to pick this up and listen to it carefully. The human spirit flies high, indeed, and the bar has been raised for me astronomically in my attempts to present this music live in the present day.

2.) UMO Jazz Orchestra with Michael Brecker: Live in Helsinki 1995



In 2015 I left a group that was doing very well, a group dedicated to the music of Michael and Randy Brecker called Breckerville. It was a decision that was hard to make, largely because it severed a tie I had forged with their music. Randy Brecker shepherded this release out for release after hearing it, a tribute to his sadly departed brother. And it's one of the finest things Michael Brecker has ever recorded. A one-off concert situation where he was the featured soloist with the Finnish big band UMO Jazz Orchestra, he brought his A game for this date.

Since leaving Breckerville, I've avoided listening to their music as a whole, feeling content to take a break from what had been a 2 ½ year commitment; but this release cuts through, making me glad I shared time on Planet Earth with a talent this huge.

3.) Bob Dylan: The Cutting Edge: The Bootleg Series Volume 12



It seems that every year I wind up putting one of these Dylan Bootleg Series box sets on the Top 10 list. Well, they're there for a reason: they remain a constant influential inspiration in my life, provoking thought and reflections on an artist that has informed my musical choices for fifty years. And, in any year, this would show up as a gem.

This release comes in a two, six, and eighteen-CD configurations depending on the depth of your interest. The eighteen is ridiculous, the two is too short to do it justice. This period of Dylan saw the release of his greatest work and the box set includes many takes of a lot of the numbers that make up Bringing It All Back Home, Blonde On Blonde,

and Highway 61 Revisited. Listening to Dylan develop his lyrics and feels for the tunes as he progresses through the takes is illuminating. Hearing some of them is like running into an old high school friend you haven't seen in decades. There's familiarity, and strangeness.

The best way to listen to this, I believe, is to make a playlist of just one alternate version of each tune. Keep it around, then replace the versions. No matter how you do it, if you love these keystones in the Dylan songbook at all and remember them, you owe it to yourself to at least check out the 2-CD version. You'll never hear the albums the same way again.

4.) John Zorn: Simulacrum



One day in October I noticed that John Zorn's *Similacrum* was going to appear in Philly at a small bar in a hipster metropolis. Having wanted to experience Zorn in concert for decades, I made my way there. Only to find Zorn nowhere in attendance. Turns out Zorn wrote the material, organized the project, and sent it out into the world to fend for itself while he stayed behind in NYC and/or Tokyo, as is his wont.

My disappointment didn't last for long. What *Similacrum* is is the ultimate organ trio, sonically hopped up on fearsome uppers and synthetic hallucinogens. John Medeski mans the organ here, and the layout of the venue dictated that I wound up directly at his feet, behind him, watching him closely. I was aware of his group Medeski, Martin, and Wood, but was never knocked out by them, mostly enjoying their work with John Scofield. But this is a different beast altogether, and Medeski was masterful at wringing tones out of that B3.

Aggressive, dissonant, and super energetic, this is as far from Jimmy Smith as an organ trio can get. And it showed me that one really can breathe new life into old forms. John Zorn has taken the organ trio into territory it's never been, and it's quite an accomplishment.

5.) Minas: Symphony in Bossa



My office partner for a decade at the University of the Arts in Philly was the late Billy Zaccagni, an incredible saxophonist, theorist, and arranger. One of his last projects, which I missed seeing live, was a concert with arrangements for the Brazilian group Minas, headed by Orlando and Patricia Haddad. With Billy's passing, they spearheaded a fundraising initiative and laid down these arrangements with a good studio recording.

And it's the best bossa album I've heard since Sinatra and Jobim teamed up. Warm, melodic, and lush, I'm glad to see Mr. Z get his due, and for the wonderful husband and wife team of Minas to show their talents in a lush setting like this. They continue to create and compose (I played accordion this year for a major work Patricia wrote about her

family history) and are two of the nicest people I know. Check out their music, you are what you play.

6.) 101 Strings: The Soul of Spain



Returning home from the Cuban Missile Crisis, my brother brought along with him a home stereo that he had built himself with his newly gained, Navy-designed electronic knowledge. The Fisher speakers filled my parent's house with music from the handful of albums he had purchased to go with this: Victory at Sea, the Peter Gunn soundtrack, Enoch Light, and others, including this selection by a studio orchestra called 101 Strings. Thanks to this, I grew up knowing Granada, Malagueña, Le Cid, Estrellita, and others. This was

considered easy listening music but it connected to the 7-year-old I was at the time.

This past year I lost my brother and rediscovered the albums he had introduced me to, unheard for decades. And 101 Strings' "The Soul of Spain" still knocked me out. I left the CD in a car, and it knocked out my family without my knowing it. Dammit, this is good music! If you're of an age that this was part of your childhood, give it another listen. My parents might have been strictly Lawrence Welk and Kate Smith, but my brother had taste.

7.) Sam Rivers and the Rivbea Orchestra: Mosaic Select #38: Sam Rivers and the Rivbea Orchestra



Sam Rivers, who passed away in 2011, was a forward-thinking multi-instrumentalist who generally avoided the screaming excesses of Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp and found a more tonal system to

work within in his emotional expression. I've enjoyed his solo work and got much more familiar with Rivers as a player after my friend Brian Groder recorded his album Torque with him. But I must admit that he wasn't in the front line when I decided what to listen to at home.

Mosaic Records, dedicated to making pristine and definitive editions of neglected and essential jazz work by way of limited edition sets, released this 3-CD set in their Select series. It chronicles Rivers's work with a big band setting, and it's unlike any big band I've ever heard. Rivers really did take his edgy sax line concept and project it into large orchestrations replete with hard-edged distorted bass solos, flailing drums, and other techniques guaranteed to piss off the aforementioned Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz Police.

I like it. It's 2015, why must big bands sound like it's 1940? Well worth checking out.

8.) The Brecker Brothers: The Bottom Line Archive: The Brecker Brothers



An interesting document of its time, the late '70's. It was influential to me this year in that its release led to a stray comment in the aforementioned Breckerville group that we should add a guitarist, which precipitated a string of events that led to my departure. And I still think that we should have avoided getting a guitarist.

Alongside the moments of brilliance in the soloing here is, unfortunately, ill-advised vocals and disco attempts. Clive Davis knew this band could break out and make Columbia Records a lot of money, but he was held back by the players' reluctance to leave NYC and their lucrative studio careers. So they assuaged Clive by always including commercial attempts that didn't make it.

Like I said, an interesting document but one in which I grind my teeth when not dropping my jaw.

9.) Kronos Quartet: Yuniko

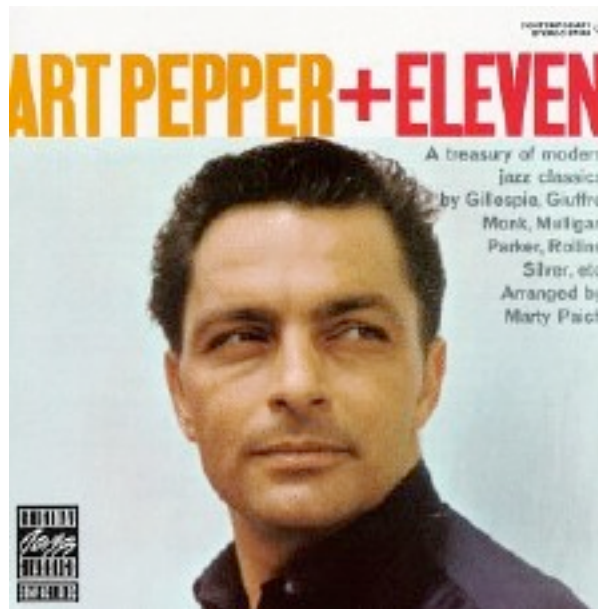


If you don't know the Kronos Quartet, you've got to try some of their music. Using a traditional classic configuration, they have commissioned dozens of modern works, often augmented by other musicians, and are responsible for a real rebirth in the art of the String Quartet.

This one is from 2011 and features a suite by Samuli Kosminen, who plays live electronics and is helped out by Finnish accordionist Kimmo Pohjonen. When you see "accordion" you'll naturally put this

into a certain category. Wrong. This is some amazing stuff, and words can't do it justice. Kronos still rules with the unexpected.

10.) Art Pepper: Art Pepper + Eleven



Re-reading Art Pepper's autobiography Straight Life was as unnerving this year as it was when I first read it in my twenties. Basically a love story of a man and his heroin habit, it twists your head around in several ways, mostly with the question of how a man this messed up could create such beauty.

This album is Exhibit A for that question. Look at that album cover. Pepper looks stoned, and he was. But put him in a studio with L.A.'s finest in 1959 and throw in some of the best arrangements ever

penned, by Marty Paich (yes, that's Toto's David Paich's dad), and you've got a timeless album. After reading about it, I found a copy of this and it is a killer. Pepper is perfection and, although I'm usually lukewarm on West Coast jazz generally, this is the finest example of that genre I know of.

Top 10 Music Albums

(2015 – John Mullin) (all concert dates below are 2016)

I will start off by saying these selections cover a wide arena of music that grab my attention and frequent my mind. Some were found more than 10 years ago and a few just quite recently. Streaming music has greatly broadened my horizons and opened the door to places and sounds I love. These suggestions are a statement of my personality and appreciation for the musicianship, recording innovations, in a craft that has always been in my soul. In no particular order, here they are:

#1 – “Bring it Back” from Catherine Russel. She was born into the NYC jazz community from her father Luis Russell, who collaborated with Louis Armstrong and others in the big band era. Catherine continues this heritage with a spring in her voice. You can hear a smile on her face while she sings these melodies.

#2 – “Ghost on the Canvas” by Glen Campbell. Yes I know, but please don't let the name alone scare you away. I believe this was his last studio production made. Suffering from Alzheimer's disease, he made the decision to do something special that could be a lasting statement. In a stretch, this is a similar story to Johnny Cash. The release at first seems dark and somewhat depressing. But after a re-listen I noticed that the music is continuous, without cuts or breaks between selections. Deep, sad, and emotional feelings are key to this music. But it is also a true example of a distinct voice in a finely crafted production.

#3 “Peace, Love, Ukulele” from Jake Shimabukuro. Really amazing how a type cast instrument can be repurposed into something completely different. I saw this artist right here in Sellersville a few years back as an opening act to (I don't remember) and was immediately knocked over with disbelief. Taking the uke to places unknown beyond the islands is realized in his musicianship. Not for everyone, but always impresses me!

#4 “If You Need Me” by Jay “Hootie” McShann. Hearing a cut from this album on Spotify one day I was hooked. Hootie was an orchestra/band leader in the pre and post WWII era. Having Charlie Parker on sax and Bernard Anderson on trumpet complimented his piano and gave balance to this recording. I hear the touch of Joplin, the flair of Ellington, and even a bit of Little Richard in the sessions. This artist is my newest find and I am just starting the exploration

#5 "Laugh" from Keller Williams. My son introduced me to this lunatic! Cranking out several releases per year, this guy must be using something to stay comatose. What always strikes me is his rambling style, coupled with the weird lyrics and subject matter (check-out Bob Rules and Freaker by the Speaker). He mastered the art of recorded loop re-wind for layering his ability to play 6-8 instruments per song at a live show. A virtual one man band. **ALERT: Keller plays at the Theatre of Living Arts on Feb. 6**

#6 "Portrait" by McCoy Tyner. Although I did not look back into your prior "Best Of" lists, it would not surprise me to find this is already there. Classic, smooth, impeccable. Need I say more?

#7 "Winter Marquee" from Nanci Griffith. Here is one that has been re-played 100 times to these ears. Released in 2002, Nanci and band appeared in NYC for this recording. Normally I am not a fan of recorded live shows, but this is one of my exceptions. As a singer/songwriter she has influenced and collaborated with many artists including Dylan, Prine, Guthrie and others. Maybe too folksy / rockabilly / country / or twangy to some; but it has really connected to me. Her performances are special and I've seen her several times. Oh, born in Texas in 1953..... a pretty good year!

#8 "Backatown" by Trombone Shorty. I think I am impressed by musicians who take a normally transparent instrument and places a spotlight on its features. Shorty does this and more. The New Orleans product is imprinting himself all over and is gaining speed. He is funky, curious, jazzy, spicy and hot.

#9 "Endless" from Tommy Emmanuel. The Australian guitar master is another recent find for me. Generally, Tommy is a 95% instrumental genius with guitar "picking" skills that has been recognized by the likes of Chet Atkins and Todd Rundgren. **ALERT: Tommy Emmanuel appears at the Keswick Theatre on February 12.**

#10 "All Access – Volume One" by Greensky Bluegrass. My last entry on the list and I can't help myself. Bluegrass has hit me hard in the last 10 years and it has not ended. This rising band from Michigan has hit the homerun with popularity with pickers to jam-band devotees. These guys are progressive, exploratory and crafty. Please take a sampling and see what you think. **ALERT: GB appears at Union Station in Philly on February 3.**

Miles Hartl

The Downward Spiral—Nine Inch Nails
Interstellar (soundtrack)—Hans Zimmer
The Untouchables (soundtrack)—Ennio Morricone
Me and Mrs. Jones: The Best of Billy Paul—Billy Paul
Song For A Grave Digger—Mike Geroni

Exodus—The New Power Generation
Tutu—Miles Davis
Heavy Metal Be-Bop – The Brecker Brothers
Soapbox Heroes—Enter The Haggis
Icon—Sheila E.

Honorary Mentions: Hard Times and Nursery Rhymes—Social
Distortion, Global—Todd Rundgren, The Hunger Games: Mockingjay
Part 1 (soundtrack)—James Newton Howard

Kaz Yoshihara

Here is my list for 2015. The number of CDs I purchase tremendously
decreased in 2015 due to Apple Music. Most of these albums are the ones I
actually bought after checking them first on Apple Music;

1. Break Stuff - Vijay Iyer: #1 album of the year. No doubt
2. Behind the Sky Feat. Tom Harrell - Jon Irabagon
3. Meridian Suite - Antonio Sanchez & Migration
4. Hommage A Eberhard Weber - Pat Metheny and Jan Garbarek
5. Tokyo Adagio - Charlie Haden and Gonzalo Rubalcaba
6. Live in Helsinki 1995 - Michael Brecker
7. Covered - Robert Glasper
8. Our Secret World - Kurt Rosenwinkel
9. Blues in My Mind - Oscar Pettiford
10. The Legendary Tapes - Weather Report

Kaz

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Jim Ryan

1. Beck - Morning Phase

This is a year late but it's still number 1 for me this year. The rock reviewer for the New Yorker called it "a triumph. Even if you listen to popular music all day, every day, you don't get many albums like this in your lifetime." This is one of the most well-produced albums I've ever heard - every note is perfectly in place. Beck's father David Campbell, the record producer and composer, did the string arrangements on several songs. I was so happy when this CD won Album of the Year and also Best Engineered Album at the last Grammy awards.

2. D'Angelo - Black Messiah

After a hiatus of 14 years D'Angelo came back with this R&B masterpiece. A joy to listen to. He's a real original.

3. Eric Dolphy - Seven Classic Albums

4. Ahmad Jamal - Complete Recordings 1951-1959

5. Cecil Taylor - Complete Recordings 1956-1962

6. Lee Morgan - Complete Recordings 1956-1962

7. Booker Ervin - Six Classic Albums

The other year you had an Oscar Peterson box set on your list, which I promptly got. This introduced me to the Real Gone Jazz label and from that to the Enlightenment label. This is a great concept for a box set to put as many as twelve albums in a bare bones format for not more than \$15. It's a great way to hear these musicians, generally early in their careers. Ahmad Jamal is a revelation. I was into him in the 70s with his more mature style but in his 20s he was all over the keyboard.

8. HBC - Scott Henderson, Jeff Berlin, and Dennis Chambers

You had this on your list a couple of years ago. Their covers of Herbie Hancock's Actual Proof, Weather Report's Mysterious Traveler and Wayne Shorter's Footprints are exceptional. A true power trio.

9. Complete Webern - Boulez - DG

10. Boulez Conducts Schoenberg - Sony

The great composer/conductor Pierre Boulez was a big champion of modern music. He's been a hero of mine since the 70s when he was selected to be the conductor of the New York Philharmonic. That was a tempestuous appointment - not many shared his enthusiasm for the modern. I got these box sets last year and the clarity and directness of these performances is striking, especially of his twelve-tone mentor Schoenberg. As I was thinking over this list the past couple of weeks I knew that I would include these. Then a few days ago Boulez died at age 90. He had retired from conducting a few years ago due to poor vision and to concentrate on his composing. Here's hoping he completed some pieces for recording. He was one of the greats.

Thanks for your list and also your podcasts - the songs bring back a lot of memories and also give new suggestions for listening

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Jack Loughhead

Seems like every year this thing gets me thinking about how I listen to music now; seemingly a constantly changing process. This year it's Amazon Prime, which gives me access to a huge variety of free music (if you don't count the cost of Prime itself). So, I now sit on boring conference calls and scan through the new offerings there, and put them in my queue to check out. As a result, I hear a lot of new music I wouldn't have otherwise. That said, I can't really say I have heard much that really excited me. That said, I can now hear for myself without financial cost the happy flapcrap the girls at the watercooler are talking about - woopy doo!! All of which is a long winded way of saying the best way of finding out about great new (to me) music continues to be direct recommendations from people of good taste. So . . . muchas gracias for keeping this thing going. I pick up at least one great thing from it every year.

And without further adieu, my year's faves are:

1. Antonio Sanchez - The Meridian Suite Like several others, I'm thinking my top listen of the year is Antonio Sanchez's latest.. Just beautiful stuff.
2. Jef Lee Johnson - The Zimmerman Shadow - This year saw the loss of a huge local talent - Jef Lee Johnson. I saw him with Mr. Huff several times, and it was always a blast. Several months back, I picked up Terri Lynn Carrington's latest (I think that was the one??), and grabbed the liner notes after hearing a cool guitar lick - was none other than JLJ. I then went back and collected a few of his recordings, one of which was this one ripping up some Dylan classics. Probably not for purists, but I love it.
3. The Aristocrats - Tres Caballeros - A pretty amazing trio with Guthrie Govan, Marco Minnemann (sp?), and Brian Beller. I understand it started out as a bit of a lark, but they really hit it off. Interesting fusion, tight as hell, and boy do they look like they're having fun! This is their latest disc, but there is a live CD of their second which includes a very cool DVD that's worth checking out.
4. Snarky Puppy - Ground Up - I can't recall how I got on to this band, but they definitely hooked me. As I understand it, they are a "collective", originally out of TX, but now in NY, with a core group, but somewhere around 40 total musicians who cycle in and out. I didn't really much like their disc last year with the Metropole Orkest, Sylva, but this earlier stuff is great.
5. Ernest Ranglin - Guitar in Ernest - Going back 10 or 15 years, I really enjoyed a number of Ranglin's reggae/calypso albums, but I had never heard this one of jazz standards until this year. It ended up getting on the player quite a few times.
6. Flower Kings - Tour Kaputt - Always a fan of good ole prog rock, this band has been one I have liked for quite a while. I think they come from Sweden. This album came out in '15, but I only heard of it part way through last year. Great symphonic rock, and you get almost 2 and a half hours of it for the price

of a single CD. I put an addition on my studio this year, and a lot this music was great for hammering!

7. Tommy Emmanuel - It's Never Too Late - My wife took me to see this Australian guitarist for my birthday last year, and he puts on quite a one man show. Somewhat in the style of Chet Atkins, he takes that approach several steps further, and is a master of percussive playing. This is his latest album, but I don't think you can go too far wrong with any of this stuff.

8. John McLaughlin - Black Light - Another great offering from one of my all time guitar heroes.

9. Shuggie Otis - Freedom Flight - Another one where I can't remember what set me off, but I ended up reacquainting myself with this album, which I had on vinyl back in the day. Still sounds great to me.

10. David Karsten Daniels - Sharp Teeth - A few years back, I heard this guy with a band called Fight the Big Bull, and liked the approach. Last year, and here I will have to give it some credit, I heard this solo album of his on Amazon Prime. Maybe not a voice everyone would like, but I find some of his music very powerful.

Well, thanks again Dave for the transfusion. Time to go order some CDs . . .

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