

CC recommends: Popular music

selected by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

In Review



A Friend of a Friend

Dave Rawlings Machine
Acony



Genuine Negro Jig

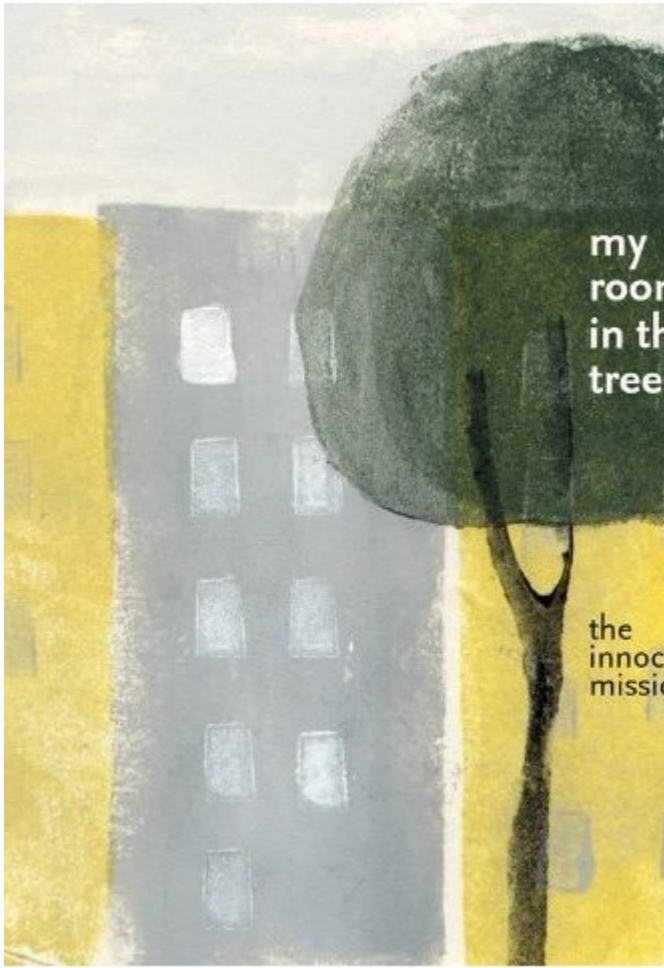
Carolina Chocolate Drops

Nonesuch



Alegrías

Howe Gelb and A Band of Gypsies
Eureka



My Room in the Trees

The Innocence Mission

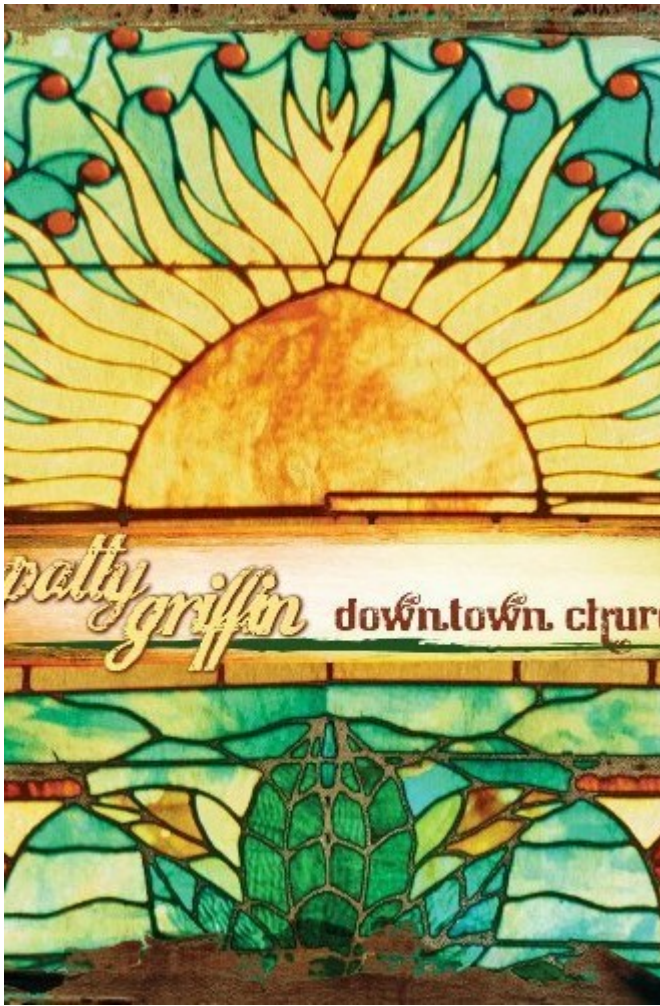
Badman



The ArchAndroid

Janelle Monáe

Bad Boy



Downtown Church

Patty Griffin
Credential



You Are Not Alone

Mavis Staples

ANTI-

Dave Rawlings Machine, *A Friend of a Friend*. Gillian Welch and her longtime sideman switch places for a loose, mostly acoustic record, with help from members of Old Crow Medicine Show. As a guitarist, Rawlings is the rare formally schooled hotshot whose take on traditional country expands rather than suffocates it. He's also a pretty serious songwriter, from the breezy fun of "Sweet Tooth" to the eschatological edge of "I Hear Them All," co-written with Old Crow's Ketch Secor.

Carolina Chocolate Drops, *Genuine Negro Jig*. While this trio is more deeply steeped in old-time string band music than is Rawlings and company, it ventures even farther from it. The multi-instrumentalists met at a gathering of black banjo players and studied under Joe Thompson, a fiddler in the oft-overlooked Piedmont black

string band tradition. Their new record ranges from traditional songs to originals to a cover of R&B singer Blu Cantrell, all performed energetically and expertly.

Howe Gelb and A Band of Gypsies, *Alegrías*. "Indie rock/flamenco crossover record" sounds like a silly gimmick. It isn't. Arizona songwriter Gelb's prodigious output—he has more than 40 albums, and two this year—features several such stylistic excursions, and here as usual he integrates disparate pieces into a strange but lovely whole. His brainy songs and raspy singing are supported by quietly grooving arrangements, with his Andalusian collaborators' fancy fretwork front and center.

The Innocence Mission, *My Room in the Trees*. Each record from this folk-pop trio is more exquisite than the last. Karen Peris's songs often address faith, offering neither bombast nor arty obscurity but quiet directness. Her voice is delicate and her songcraft first-rate, while Don Peris plays guitar with the easy restraint of a virtuoso focused entirely on the song. The arrangements are even more acoustic than usual, and they sound great—though Don's electric playing never got old.

Janelle Monáe, *The ArchAndroid*. Monáe is as dazzling and outrageous a performer as Lady Gaga—and far better at singing, writing songs and remembering to wear clothes. Her high-concept debut album melds dance pop, funk, R&B and a dozen other styles to tell an Afrofuturist tale of a messianic android. The concept works, but that's just a bonus—this is the most infectious pop album of the year, performed by an astonishingly talented and versatile young singer.

Patty Griffin, *Downtown Church*. Griffin is a great singer and a great songwriter, but her blunt instrument of a voice often overpowers her intimate songs. So a gospel record is a terrific fit, as is producer-guitarist Buddy Miller. He builds stripped-down tracks with a subtle modern grit; she sings away, to great effect. The material—traditional, original and cover songs—focuses on gospel, broadly conceived: the songs, sound and personnel bridge musical gaps between black and white and old and new.

Mavis Staples, *You Are Not Alone*. As different from *Downtown Church* as two gospel records produced by alt-country heroes could be. Wilco's Jeff Tweedy takes an admirably light touch sonically, letting Staples's band sound like itself: straight-ahead, bluesy, richly layered yet subdued. Tweedy wrote two songs for the project, which also includes blues, soul and pop classics. But the main attraction is Staples's return to her roots, singing traditional gospel songs and early Pops Staples numbers "Don't Knock" and "Downward Road."