

theguardian

**MY FAVOURITE  
ALBUM**  
BEST OF THE BLOG

SH  RTS

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# Introduction

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~~How do you choose your favourite album? Reading through this selection of pieces in which—~~ Guardian writers eulogise about the records that mean the most to them, it seems the answer is: you don't, they choose you.

That, certainly, was the case for Jon Wilde, whose moving piece on Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings opens this book. Consumed with grief following his mother's death and his brother's suicide, Jon had all but given up on music before Armstrong's swing took hold, dragging him from the darkness and back into the light. It was also the case for Hadley Freeman, who happily admits she planned to write about Daft Punk but found herself jumping around her bedroom singing along to Madonna's Like a Prayer whenever she tried. It was most definitely the case for me, too. No matter how many days I spent daydreaming to Nick Drake's Bryter Layter or spinning the Velvet Underground's hushed third album, I ended up falling in love most of all with a bunch of arty Canadians who sang string-drenched hymns about explicit gay sex. That's the power of music for you (the penultimate entry in this book reveals who I'm on about).

In these 30 stories you will, of course, come across some wonderful writing about music. Laura Barton delicately describes Van Morrison's Astral Weeks, an album whose songs "don't so much play as wrap themselves around your legs, get stuck beneath your fingernails". Katharine Viner salutes the Smiths and explains how "Morrissey beats a path to your head, but it's Marr who carries the words to your heart." Kitty Empire, meanwhile, attacks from the opposite end of the spectrum, comparing the guitar solos of AC/DC to "endless streams of ejaculate" in her appreciation of the "preposterous, drongoid record" that is AC/DC's Back in Black.

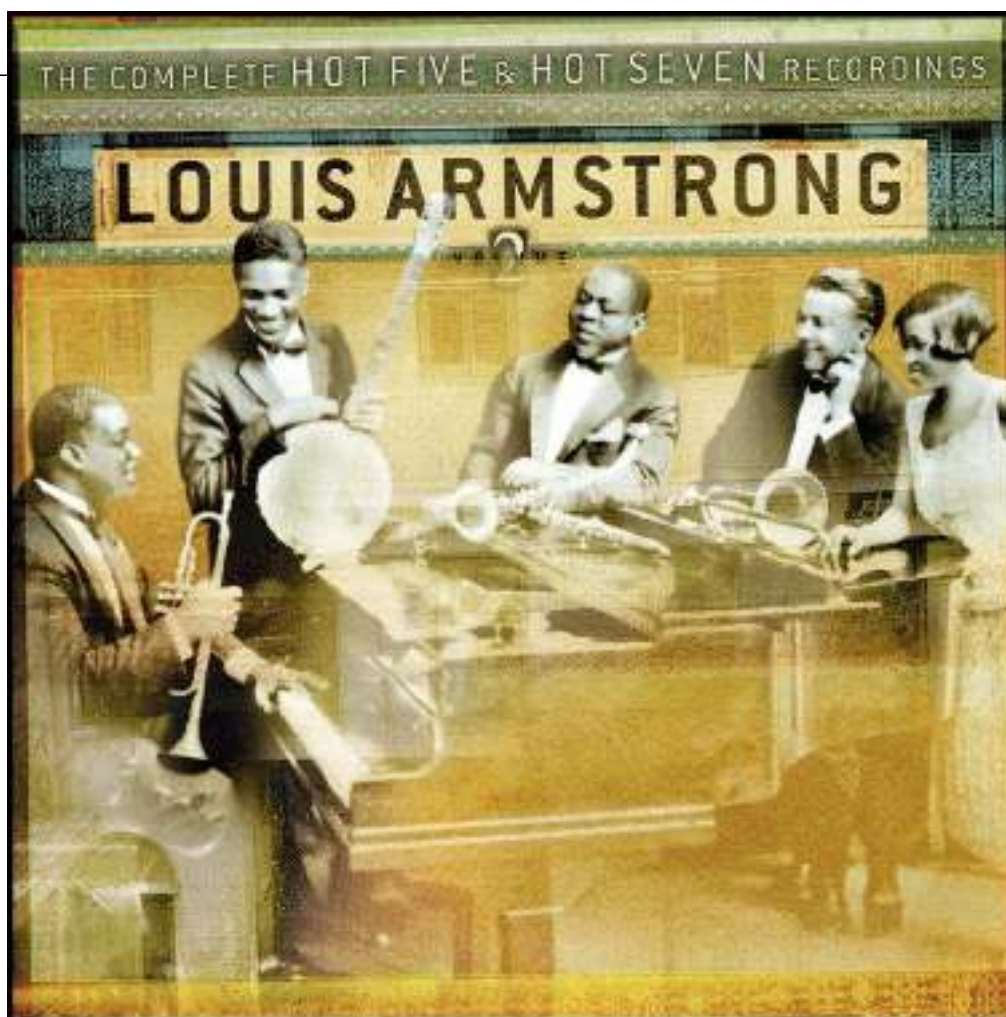
What makes these paeans to pop stand out most, however, is the way they detail not just why but *how* we first fall in love with records. I love that Pink Floyd's Dark Side helped bring Simon Hattenstone closer to his father after they had suffered a major falling out. It's touching to read how Kieran Yates used Erykah Badu's Mama's Gun as a map to help her understand the journey from teenage girl to young woman. And Dafydd Goff unfurls a fantastic childhood tale in which he finds himself questioning his strict religious upbringing after being exposed to sleazy tales from the Sunset Strip (courtesy of Guns N' Roses and their Appetite for Destruction).

Because these pieces are so personal, they're not to be taken as a comprehensive list of the "best" albums ever made. And thank God for that. We've read enough bland critical lists discussing the merits of Revolver or Pet Sounds. Rather, these records reflect the individual writer's tastes and are all the better for their wanton subjectivity.

Naturally, the majority are from the 80s onwards – childhood and those impressionable teenage years are the ones in which we forge the strongest bonds with music. But it's not a science, and not everyone falls in love with an album for the same reasons, or at the same time. That's the beauty of these pieces, and the reason they all have a different story to tell. Who knows, maybe you'll find your own favourite album through reading this book ...

# Pre 1950s

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## **The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings by Louis Armstrong**

With his life falling apart around him, Jon Wilde had all but given up on music. Then he heard the sounds of Louis Armstrong and was pulled back from the brink ...

Even though Louis Armstrong ultimately changed my life, I came to jazz late and not without a fight. As a teenager in the late 70s, I had my work cut out keeping up with the weekly welter of “catchy” post-punk releases, not to mention determining the artists between Little Richard and the Clash who were worth my time and pocket money. Jazz, meanwhile, seemed like a vast ocean swarming with thousands of esoteric riddles I could never hope to solve. Down the years I accumulated the jazz albums (Kind of Blue, A Love Supreme etc) that eventually find their way into most self-respecting record collections, but I can’t say I played them often. In any meaningful way, the door leading to jazz enlightenment remained firmly shut to me.

In 1992, somewhat jaded with meat-and-two-spuds rock music, I stumbled across a budget-priced box set of Armstrong’s Hot Fives and Hot Sevens in a New York record store. Listening to it upon m



return to the UK, I was instantly transfixed – yet it would be a good while before I discovered just how profoundly the music of Louis Armstrong could affect and shape me.

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Recorded between 1925 and 1928, the tracks that make up the Hot Fives and Hot Sevens are rightly considered among the most important and influential in 20th-century American music. They mark the point when Armstrong jettisoned the traditional collective improvisation of New Orleans-style jazz and almost single-handedly transformed the music from a group art into a medium for the pioneering soloist.

The most famous song of these sessions is Satchmo's version of King Oliver's West End Blues. But there's an argument to be made for Potato Head Blues being the great man's most groundbreaking work. Recorded in May 1927 with his peerless Hot Seven ensemble, it's significant mainly for Armstrong's cornet solo following the banjo break. A feat of thrilling, high-wire improvisation, this is the moment when Louis first swings, really swings, elevates jazz to a true art form, and holds the world in thrall. The seeds of everything truly revolutionary that followed in rhythm & blues, rock'n'roll and soul music is embodied in this 44-second solo. You don't need to read around the subject. You only need to listen to draw a straight line from Armstrong to Louis Jordan's Tympany Five to Fats Domino, Elvis and everything beyond. Such is the crazed purity of Satch's trumpet sound that it's easy to forget just how wide-ranging was the influence of his untrained vocal style. Once compared to "a piece of sandpaper calling to its mate", it made for unconventional beauty but still served as a model for Bing Crosby, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sinatra and countless other masters of the craft. One listen to the imperishable Heebie Jeebies pretty much nails that argument.

In 2004 I found out just how much The Hot Fives and Hot Sevens meant to me. My life was following an untidy, downward curve. An excruciating divorce was just the start. Balancing full-time single-parenthood, the insecurities of freelance writing and a series of disastrous relationships damn near sapped my soul. Inch by torpid inch, I edged ever closer to financial and emotional bankruptcy, Churchill's black dog in hot pursuit all the while. To quote pop's laureate, Smokey Robinson, "misery had surely found me." Worse, far worse, was about to come calling. First, the death of my mother after a long battle with cancer. Then, with fate quickly darkening, my elder brother's decision to end his life by securing a large can of paint to his body and jumping off a pier into the Pembrokeshire sea.

For months, subsumed by grief, I moped around, unable to bring myself to listen to music at all. The more beautiful the music, the more pain it caused me. At times I wondered whether I would ever listen to music again, or indeed, how long I was prepared to soldier on for.

Then, one sallow October morning, I took a deep breath and lifted my Armstrong box set off the shelf and played Potato Head Blues. As the needle dropped and the music swung and steered, I remembered that, in the film *Manhattan*, Woody Allen lists it as one of the things that make life worth living. For once, Woody was right. So I played the song again, and again. For almost a year following The Hot Five and Hot Seven sessions were just about all I played, compulsively, obsessively, as need must. Even in my darkest hours, Louis's daring trumpet and unimpeachable vocal shone the light in. Listening to Alligator Crawl, Mahogany Hall Stomp and Twelfth Street Rag, the world tantalisingly

danced before me and drew me back from the brink. In my ears, angel choirs sang their hallelujahs. Gradually I learned all over again how to face myself and live my life forwards, improvising all the way with Louis's gloriously unrestrained trumpet fantasies as a guide. Now, I'm not certain whether the music of Louis Armstrong actually saved my life. What I do know for sure is that his joyous music taught me how to live again.

# 1950s

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## Brilliant Corners by Thelonious Monk

Even with his technically gifted band, Thelonious Monk's jazz classic took 25 takes to get right. John Fordham salutes an audacious feat of musicianship

When I was discovering jazz as a student, Thelonious Monk seemed to epitomise the artistic originality, indifference to rules and guileless eccentricity (he liked weird hats! He was given to shuffling dances onstage!) that I loved about the music. Monk's piano solos clanged with dissonance, bumped along in hopping runs or glowered with baleful silences, and his astonishing compositions (now recognised as modern musical landmarks, regardless of genre) had a strange, inelegant beauty that brusquely reinvented what melody, harmony and rhythm could mean.

Brilliant Corners, recorded for the Riverside label in 1956 with an A-list band including saxophonist Sonny Rollins and former Charlie Parker drummer Max Roach, was the most compositionally ambitious session in former church pianist Monk's decade-long jazz career thus far. In a legendarily fractious session, the title track's growling theme was so treacherous in its lurching phrasing and abrupt time changes that a band this good *still* spent 25 takes on it, and the final version was only possible by splicing two takes together. But Brilliant Corners was no calculated technical highwire

act, but a piece of audaciously adventurous composing that has never lost its power to startle and seduce over the decades.

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From Monk's opening stabbed chords (played as if he were chipping rock) to the bone-shaking notes, guttural horn harmonies and sudden thematic gallops, *Brilliant Corners* is gripping – as are the composer's jangling improvisations, and Rollins's lazily unfolding and huge-toned tenor solo. The record is full of captivating variety, too, encompassing the urban graininess of *Hornin' In*, the relaxed groove of *Let's Cool One* and the bleary rootsiness of the wonderful blues *Ba Lue Bolivar Ba Lues Are*. *Brilliant Corners* may have arrived just before the late-50s free-jazz upheavals of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane and Cecil Taylor, but Monk proved he was equally unafraid to wrench music into thrilling new shapes.

# 1960s

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VAN MORRISON ASTRAL WEEKS



## Astral Weeks by Van Morrison

Van Morrison was just 22 years old when he made his masterpiece. Laura Barton marvels at a maverick creation that can vibrate your soul

In 1968, Van Morrison was 22 years old and already one album down, a Northern Irishman in New York, with a fledgling career built on garage rock and Brown Eyed Girls. He was also involved in a contract dispute with his label, Bang Records, that prevented him from recording, and discouraged live venues from booking him.

This is an album heavy with yearning, with an aching for the streets of Belfast, for the “gardens all misty and wet with rain”, for being “conquered in a car seat”. It marries folk, rock, blues, jazz and gospel, flute, harpsichord and vibraphone, to create these eight songs that don’t so much play as wrap themselves around your legs, get stuck beneath your fingernails.

Morrison himself described *Astral Weeks* as an opera of sorts, a story with definite characters, a song-cycle of “poetry and mythical musings channelled from my imagination”. And so we find memories of viaducts and slipstreams, ferry boats and cadillacs and cherry wine, mingling with talk of Huddie Ledbetter and little red shoes. We find the bewitching Madame George, the ecstatic Sweet

Thing, the great knee-deep tangle of reminiscence that made up Cyprus Avenue. It was one of those albums that seemed to be about everything and nothing, the past and the now, the vital and the fleeting, and that somehow stood quite complete in its vision.

It was Lester Bangs who put it best: “Astral Weeks, insofar as it can be pinned down, is a record about people stunned by life, completely overwhelmed, stalled in their skins, their ages and selves, paralysed by the enormity of what in one moment of vision they can comprehend,” he wrote. “Maybe what it boiled down to is one moment’s knowledge of the miracle of life.”

It baffled many upon its release, listeners thrown by its strange rhythms and peculiar lyrics, but over the following decades it would acquire towering cult status. Much of this is down to the record’s remarkable ability to prompt an overwhelming emotional response – the album’s producer, Lewis Merenstein, has described how, upon hearing the title track, he began crying. “It just vibrated in my soul,” he said.

This is an album I grew up with, and that embodies everything I love about Morrison’s work – the great rich stew of it, the beguiling swarm of the music, lyrics that are proved on the pulses, a voice that sounds like rain against granite – dour and swarthy and half-grunted, barking and nickering its way through the “clicking, clacking of the high-heeled shoe”. It stands to me as a masterpiece, a maverick, quite extraordinary creation.





The BEATLES

## **The Beatles by The Beatles (aka The White Album)**

Jon Dennis recalls Christmas in 1978 spent with the best gift of all – the Beatles’ sprawling but sensational double album

I first heard the White Album on Christmas Day 1978. I was shocked. I immediately phoned my best friend Louis and demanded he abandon his family and come over to listen to it right away. “No Elvis Beatles and the Rolling Stones in 1977,” the Clash had declared on their song 1977, the B-side of White Riot. But in the late 70s, just as contemporary pop music was moving out from the shadow of the 60s and getting interesting again, we’d been discovering the Beatles. We’d devoured their red and blue double-album compilations, as well as Sgt Pepper and Abbey Road. But nothing had really prepared us for the White Album.

The White Album is year zero. For a start, there’s the blank sleeve, designed by the late Richard Hamilton. It gave nothing away, in stark contrast to the multiple clues offered by Peter Blake’s detailed collage for Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, released the previous year. If Sgt Pepper was British psychedelia’s high-water mark, The Beatles (the White Album’s actual title, and itself a

blank) signalled turmoil. Revolution was in the air in 1968, with widespread unrest and the disintegration of established social orders. And the Beatles' own disintegration was becoming evident for the first time on the White Album. Recording sessions were often fraught, each member working separately on their own songs rather than as the four-headed monster of the Beatlemania era.

Like the Beatles' earlier albums, the White Album is eclectic, but here the songs are in conflict rather than harmony. They collide with each other, some in your face (Helter Skelter), others lurking in the half-light, daring to be discovered (Long, Long, Long). Why was I initially shocked by the White Album? Mostly because I found – I still do find – the album's close so devastating: the musique concrete of Revolution #9, the apex of the Beatles' introduction of radical art into the mainstream, is followed by the schmaltzy lullaby Good Night. The contrast is mind-blowing. The Beatles knew how to close an album.

Much of the album was written on acoustic guitars during the group's visit to Rishikesh, giving tracks such as Dear Prudence, Blackbird and Mother Nature's Son a bucolic feel. Others – Yer Blues, Birthday, Everybody's Got Something to Hide Except for Me and My Monkey – are bare-bones rock, pointing the way to the ill-fated Let it Be project. There was effortless pastiche, of the Beach Boys on Back in the USSR and doo-wop on Happiness Is a Warm Gun. The dazzling studio innovations of Sgt Pepper were largely shunned, replaced by stripped-down introspection. While Sgt Pepper is bathed in sunny nostalgia, the White Album is anxious, yearning for a return to the security of childhood (the uncredited, hidden track Can You Take Me Back) and for some rest (I'm So Tired).

I disagree with the suggestion that the White Album should have been a single album – if anything its flaws make it more interesting. And as for its sheer endless variety ... well, that's the reason why, over thirty Christmases later, I still find myself returning to it and discovering something new.

# 1970s

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## **Dark Side of the Moon by Pink Floyd**

Pink Floyd's prog-rock opus helped nurse Simon Hattenstone back to health. But it did more than that – it also brought him and his father back together

I was 11 years old, had spent two years in bed with encephalitis, and had just started listening to music again. My parents bought me a music centre – massive speakers, radio, tape recorder, record player, stereo, the works. The ultimate in hi-tech. And I was buying like crazy – Mum and Dad were so pleased I had made it back to health, they didn't notice, or care, that I was constantly blagging money off them for more records. Then I bought Dark Side of the Moon, and didn't get another record for months. I didn't need one.

Everything about the album was perfect – the black cover, the prism image, the poster of those unearthly pyramids, the great curly sounds that came out of Rick Wright's synthesisers, Roger Waters's puckered lips, Dave Gilmour's hippy hair, the anti-capitalist onslaught (or so I thought), the ghostly despair of the music and, of course, the lyrics.

I knew nothing about Syd Barrett at the time, but I knew everything about me. And this was my

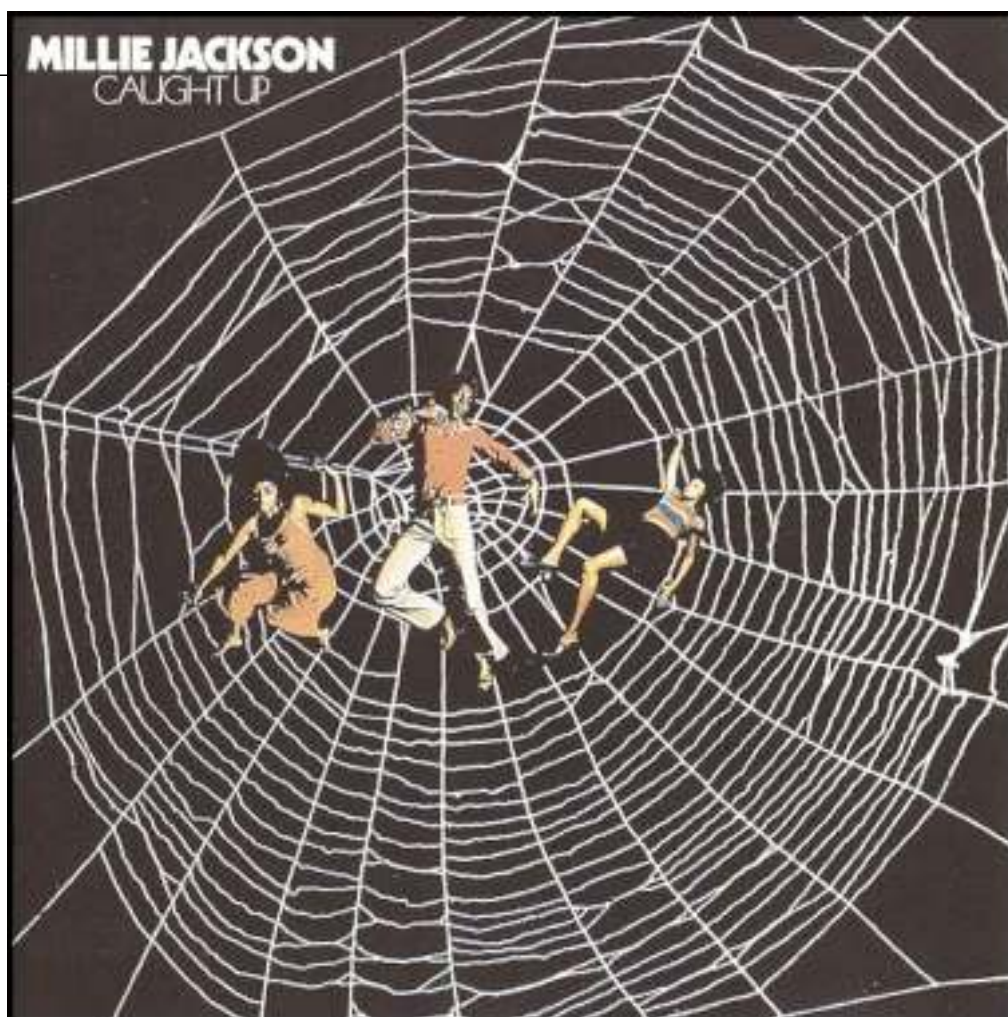
album. I had had inflammation of the brain, almost died, had gone the full circle of lunacy, and withdrawn from the world. Now I was getting better, and Dark Side of the Moon helped me make a mad sense of everything that had happened.

It also brought me and Dad back together. Our relationship had virtually broken down when I first became ill. His best friend Bert was my doctor, and Bert had thought I was making it all up. Dad was caught between loyalties – me or Bert. And for a long time it looked as if he had chosen Bert. Eventually, he came back to me, but we needed to do a lot of bridge building. And this was where the Floyd came in.

It was summer 1974, and he would take afternoons off work (a massive sacrifice for him because he was a workaholic) and come into my bedroom and listen to the Floyd with me. There were two beds in my room. I lay on mine, he lay on the other, and we shut our eyes and concentrated. I didn't know what was going through his head, but I knew what was going through mine – how could any prog-rock group understand me so well? Every bit of my fucked-up personality was reflected in that record – Money was about all the greedy bastards out there, Us and Them was about me against the world, Time was about dying (“Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way” is one of the great lyrics), as was The Great Gig in the Sky.

Meanwhile, Brain Damage might as well have been called Simon Hattenstone: My Story: “You look through the door/ And throw away the key/ There's someone in my head but it's not me.”

Exactly. My head had exploded with dark forebodings, my dam had broken open many years too soon. The lunatics were in my hall, in my head, every bleedin' where. When I sang along to Brain Damage I felt as if I was singing my life. Back then, I didn't understand that all those years Dad was crippled by depression, so perhaps Dark Side of the Moon meant just as much to him in the same way. Every day that summer he'd come into my room, and we'd lie on our respective beds, and listen to it all the way through in silence with eyes shut. And at the end, without fail, he'd say: “Best bleddy record in the world that, Si.”



## Caught Up by Millie Jackson

This concept album about a love triangle contained important home truths about female desire. Listen to Millie, says Suzanne Moore

If loving you is wrong, as the opening track on Millie Jackson's fourth album states, then I don't want to be right. I could have picked an album that more people listen to, that is less schlocky, a lot more cool. But I didn't want to be right and I love Millie Jackson's *Caught Up* as much now as I did in the mid-70s. The cover: three people trapped in a spider's web of "lurve" may be of its time. But back then Jackson was singing about sexual relationships in a complicated and grown up way that, for me, signalled a world to come.

I just love her voice. Raw power indeed: world weary, swooping from tender-sweet to a licentious roar. *Caught Up* is a concept album. The concept, however, wasn't the "state of the universe", as was then fashionable. No, it was the everyday concept of a love triangle. Jackson tells us how it is to be the mistress, how it is to be the wife, how it is to know a relationship is over, how desire waxes and wanes as domesticity takes over, how to leave a lover.

We used to play this album in my friend Val's bedroom, which was the coolest room I had ever seen.

as it was painted in black and purple stripes. Alongside Jackson we played Sly Stone and Rahsaan Roland Kirk. The boys at the time lectured us on the brilliance of Cream.

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The ones that did know, knew that if you wanted to seduce a girl, Millie Jackson was your woman. She made sex sound forbidden but inevitable. Wrong but very right. The irresistible combination. The epic opening track has Millie the mistress about to make her married lover go home, a big production builds around her big voice, she is watching the time, remaining in control and then ... bang. "Forget about the clock on the wall," she sings. He stays.

She then turns it all around in The Rap (I don't think I knew what rapping was in 1974). She lets us know that though it's hard to be with a guy who is with someone else, it also has its advantages: "You don't have to wash no one's funky drawers but your own." We go on to hear about the sadness of the wife and the futility of fighting.

The last track where she reworks Bobby Goldsboro's cheesy Summer is genius. A couple of years later Patti Smith was to blow away the need to change the gender in a lyric with Gloria. But what Jackson does here remains extraordinary. Sure I can retrospectively deconstruct it, but at the time I simply knew she was singing about what it feels like to be a young girl who knows and doesn't know quite what she is doing when she decides to lose her virginity: "The sweat trickled down the front of my gown/ I thought it would melt me."

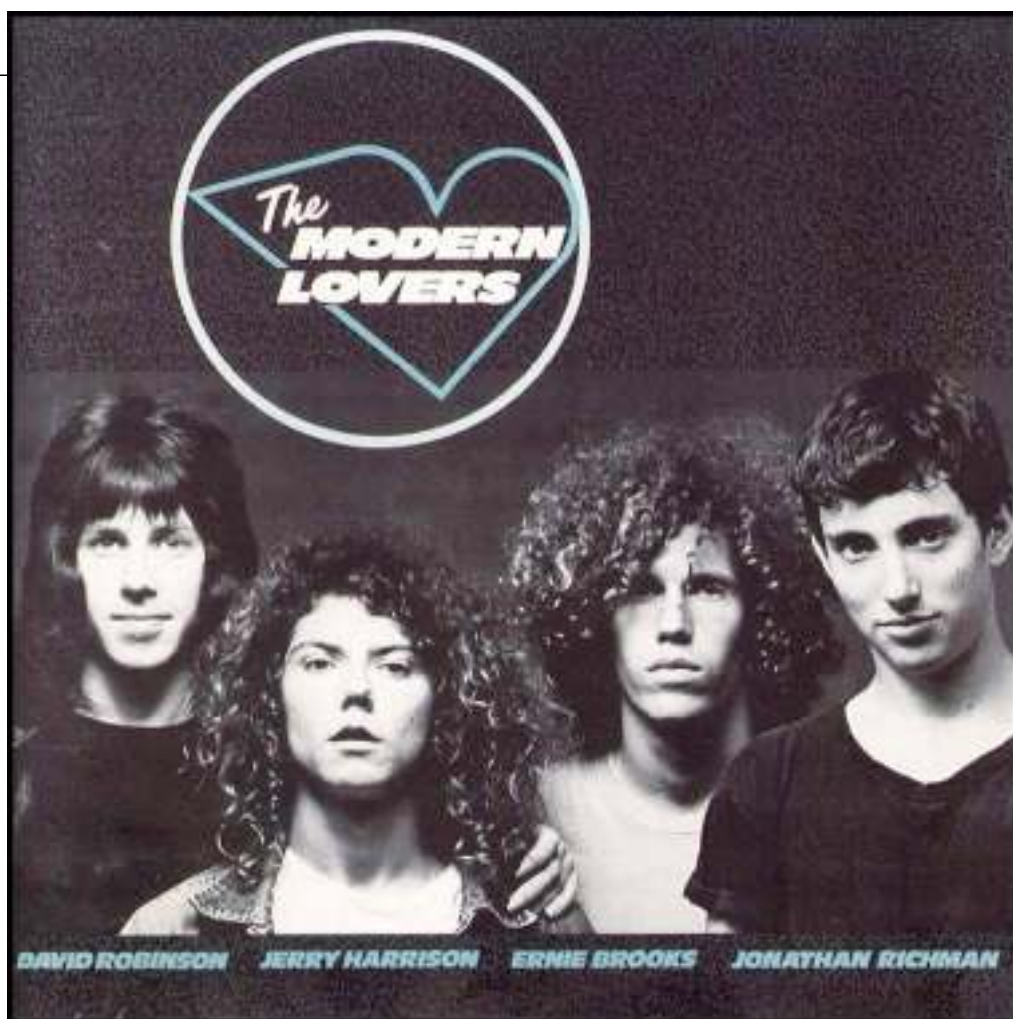
Years ago, the late great radio presenter Charlie Gillett asked me on his show to talk about my favourite music, and he seemed a little confused by my choices. I don't think Ciccone Youth were up his street and when I played Millie Jackson he listed some older soul singers I needed to listen to. I am well aware of the history of funk and absolute filth that proceeded Jackson, but men always do need to try and "educate" women about music. They never stop trying. Bless them.

But listen to Millie. Let her be in charge. "I threw back my hair/ Like you were not there." Her shoulders are bare. He tries not to stare. Jackson is wanting to be wanted. It's working.

Caught Up is not pop S&M or focus-group sexiness. It's earthy, messy emotional stuff. Sublime, destructive, healing, hating, loving. At the time it was different to guys singing about doing it all night long, something that, as any teenage girl knows, teenage boys are indeed capable of – impressive only if you want relentless pounding.

So back then Caught Up offered a different vision, a series of climaxes of lust and laughter and loss. I didn't understand it all then. I don't now. I just fell in love with the way this woman owns her own desire and her own mistakes. She oozes passion and power from every pore. Caught Up is the soundtrack of letting go.





## The Modern Lovers by the Modern Lovers

The Modern Lovers weren't interested in drugs, death or darkness. That's why their wide-eyed view of the world chimed with a teenage Michael Hann

It starts with the name: the Modern Lovers. I can't think of a more perfect name for a band: if rock'n'roll was about romance and the forward motion of popular culture, that name captured the promise of the music in as economical a form possible. It continues with the cover: no glossy photo, or Storm Thorgerson faux-profundity, just a logo that looks like the commercial signage you see flashing past as you drive through the strip developments of suburban America. But the only album ever released by the Modern Lovers – and it's not even really an album, just a collection of 1972 demos released in 1976, long after the band had broken up – rests on the songs of Jonathan Richman.

As a teenager, Richman had been obsessed with the Velvet Underground and the Stooges. He hung out with the Velvets when they played in Boston; he went to visit them in New York. The jet roar of the Modern Lovers, with organ and electric guitar combining into an unsubtle but brutally propulsive unit, owed everything to the Velvets of *Sister Ray* and *What Goes On*, but with one crucial difference. Where Lou Reed and Iggy Pop were interested in darkness, Richman preferred the light.



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