



*Treats* – Sleigh Bells: perhaps no musical act epitomises their genre as much as Sleigh Bells: the Brooklyn duo of Derek E. Miller and Alexis Krauss more than live up to their “noise pop” tag with their debut *Treats*. With the distortion heavy, the snare echoing and the amp dialled to 11, this raw and visceral record will leave your eardrums sore.

*Valleys of Neptune* – Jimi Hendrix: Hendrix died 40 years ago but his legacy as the greatest electric guitarist ever remains absolutely untouched – his posthumous albums are a constant reminder of that. Although these songs are hardly Hendrix’s best work, his virtuosic guitar skills always make for a blissful sonic experience.

*Broken Dreams Club* – Girls: although Girls released their critically acclaimed album *Album* late last year and have been touring most of this year, Christopher Owens and J.R. White still found time to churn out this little six-track EP. Lead single *Heartbreaker* is an airy, soft anthem that floats through speakers, and other tracks such as *Carolina* continue their trend of lovelorn, lonesome sounds.

*Clapton* – Eric Clapton: the legendary Clapton’s 19th solo album is slow burning, understated and filled with emotional warmth. It’s not exactly what Clapton fans of *Layla* or *Cream* may want to hear,

but at the age of 65, it’s a fitting sound for a man who’s done it all.

*Wake Up!* – John Legend and The Roots: a fine collaboration between the soul singer and the hip hop group. They do a fine job of adding a contemporary twist to 60s and 70s political-driven soul tunes, most notably on lead single *Hard Times*.

*The Suburbs* – Arcade Fire: Arcade Fire’s gloomy tone continues here as the opening title track starts off sounding like a light piano romp. But the tension of the guitar chords builds and the message of the song is clear: the dreams you had as children growing up disappear when the real world kicks in.

*Tomorrow Morning* – Eels: last year, Mark Oliver Everett (aka E, the man behind Eels) released *Hombre Lobo*, a soulful rock album that painted a depressing story of a heartbroken man. What a difference a year makes: E is a completely changed man, and his album *Tomorrow Morning* – filled with sappy optimism – reflects that.

*All Day* – Girl Talk: some say Girl Talk’s music – a schizophrenic mix

of pop choruses, rock riffs and rap verses – is for people with short attention spans. But in the age of Twitter, Facebook, iPhones, BlackBerrys and the like – who doesn’t?

#### HAMISH MCKENZIE

*The Age of Adz* – Sufjan Stevens: he might have been suicidal when he wrote it – at least that’s what it sounds like – but that might have been just the ticket. Stevens takes his usual lily-white guitar-and-vocals sound in an astonishing direction, introducing industrial beats, dissonant electronics and two epic numbers – the title track and the 25-minute *Impossible Soul* – that give this work an enduring operatic quality.

*High Violet* – The National: this band can’t produce bad work. On the back of *Alligator* and *Boxer*, *High Violet* is another brooding rock album that requires none of the flashing lights of modernity to get attention. The National prove understatement is as loud as any instrument.

*Broken Bells* – Broken Bells: at first it seems a little flat, relying on typical Shins-like harmonies from James Mercer, but give *Broken Bells* repeat listens. Danger Mouse’s subtle touches on production – synth swirls, melancholic bass, slow, deliberate beats – ultimately shine blurry lights on Mercer’s brainy lyrics and spry vocal whimsy.

*For Long Tomorrow* – Toe: the Japanese four-piece take their weaving-guitars and drums-led instrumental rock in a more soulful direction in *For Long Tomorrow*, adding more vocals and an even more polished version of their great restrained pop number *Goodbye*. OK, this album was released in December 2009, but it was too late to make last year’s top 10-lists. It deserves to be here.

*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* – Kanye West: West has one of the best albums ever here. Big, bold, full of juicy beats and accompanied by a 34-minute video for the single *Runaway*, West’s MJ-referencing latest is a mega contribution to the world of pop-leaning hip hop.

*Halcyon Digest* – Deerhunter: part sleepy indie pop, part retro-rock throwback, and with dashes of psychedelia stirred into whirls of hazy guitars, Deerhunter’s fourth album awakened excitement among indie critics – and for good reason.

*Magic Chairs* – Efterklang: this Danish collective took the semi-raucous jumbled brilliance of previous efforts *Tripper* and *Parades* and turned the dial down a bit, making *Magic Chairs* a more accessible pop record that nudges orchestral and choral indie pop a little further towards the mainstream. A mood-lifting listen.

*This is Happening* – LCD Soundsystem: James Murphy’s post-punk sensibilities are again given a highly danceable back-beat with appropriately curmudgeonly wit in the best – and probably last – LCD Soundsystem record.

*Contra* – Vampire Weekend: just when it was becoming cool to not like them, the band prove they’re a serious musical act, branching out from the Afro-beats of their first album to offer this slow-burning and darkly bright long-player.

*Expo 86* – Wolf Parade: Spencer Krug’s voice is still huge and haunting, Dan Boeckner is still a guitar slayer, and Wolf Parade still peddle that sinister rock sound that sends shivers down the spine. Dense, tense and brilliant.