



Must-Hear Music of 2014



Frank Maddocks

BY MATT HENDRICKSON - DECEMBER/JANUARY 2015

A look back at a few albums from the past year that deserve your ear

>[Listen to a playlist from these artists](http://gardenandgun.com/media/playlist-must-hear-songs-2014) (<http://gardenandgun.com/media/playlist-must-hear-songs-2014>)

What do a high-pitched warbler, a burgeoning blues god, and Southern rock's coolest couple have in common? They all put out stellar albums this year. And though these artists might not be megastars (yet), if you missed these gems, they're well worth a visit. Check them—plus three more great listens—out below, and round out your musical year in the know.

1. Lee Bains III & the Glory Fires

Dereconstructed

From the swaggering rock of Lynyrd Skynyrd to the character-driven song craft of the Drive-By Truckers, there are plenty of ruminations on “what it means to be a Southerner.” On the blistering *Dereconstructed*, Lee Bains III delivers his own version like a preacher with a megaphone in one hand and a grenade in the other. Bains hails from Birmingham, a city torn apart by some of the South's most tragic events, and the singer isn't shy about assailing the shortcomings and flaws, while also delivering a dose of don't-forget-where-you're-from pride. It's fiercely intelligent stuff with a raucous sound.

Song you must hear: The shout-along ode to B'ham “[The Weeds Downtown.](http://gardenandgun.com/media/playlist-must-hear-songs-2014)”

(<http://gardenandgun.com/media/playlist-must-hear-songs-2014>)

2. Gary Clark Jr.

Gary Clark Jr. Live

If you haven't seen Gary Clark Jr. live yet, for the sake of the blues: Go see Gary Clark Jr. live! (He'll tour again in early 2015.) In the meantime, take a deep dive into his first live album for

a sampling from one of the most electrifying performers in music today. Live albums can sound flat for some artists, but Clark's effort captures the snap and monster groove of his soul-shaking shows. The album culls tracks from gigs throughout 2013–14, but what it might lack in single-show cohesiveness is made up for in his frenzied energy.

Song you must hear: The explosive riff on Jimi Hendrix's "Third Stone from the Sun," which morphs into Albert Collins's "[If You Love Me Like You Say.](#)"

(<http://gardenandgun.com/media/playlist-must-hear-songs-2014>)

3. Shovels & Rope

Swimmin' Time

The musical collaboration between husband and wife Michael Trent and Cary Ann Hearst makes a gigantic splash on their third album together, *Swimmin' Time*. The duo has moved beyond simple lyrical sketches, creating vivid nautical-themed stories of desperate fishermen, addicts, and lovesick couples. The arrangements are remarkable in their complexity, layers of horns on top of a snappy tambourine, fuzzy guitars, and two-part harmonies. But they never feel forced. *Swimmin' Time* has the Charleston, South Carolina, couple jumping off the high board and nailing the entry.

Song you must hear: The mind-blowing piano chug and guitar buzz of "[Bridge on Fire.](#)"

(<http://gardenandgun.com/media/playlist-must-hear-songs-2014>)

4. Greensky Bluegrass

If Sorrows Swim

Greensky Bluegrass has been one of roots music's most unsung acts, relying on word of mouth about its white-hot live shows. Especially considering the success of acts like Mumford & Sons, the Kalamazoo, Michigan, band deserves wider acclaim. But while Mumford tends toward anthemic theatrics, the Greensky guys fall back on impeccable playing, mixing varied arrangements with a grittier sensibility.

Song you must hear: The spooky, lonesome "[Windshield.](#)"

(<http://gardenandgun.com/media/playlist-must-hear-songs-2014>) which would fit perfectly in an episode of an Appalachian *True Detective*.

5. Christopher Denny

If The Roses Don't Kill Us

Oh my God, that *voice*. Androgynous, soaring, and glorious, with inflections of Bessie Smith and Roy Orbison. And those stories. On *Roses*, Denny is warts and all, weaving vivid reflections of his years-long struggle with drugs and homelessness. This is a heavy-duty album, but it's never heavy-handed. Rather, it feels as if Denny is curled up on a couch next to you, gently regaling you with a guitar and tales of loss and renewal.

Song you must hear: If the first five seconds of the opener, "[Happy Sad.](#)"

(<http://gardenandgun.com/media/playlist-must-hear-songs-2014>) don't grab you, you might want to check your pulse.

6. Lera Lynn

The Avenues

Lera Lynn made a splash earlier in 2014 with her chill-inducing cover of Bruce Springsteen's "Fire," and on *The Avenues* she deftly shows that her flair for hushed dramatics was no one-off. The album is stark and minimalist, with the music stripped down to just a guitar and drums behind Lynn's breathy vocals, which wrap the listener in a sort of aural Snuggie.

Song you must hear: The sweet melancholic pop of "[La Di Da.](#)"

(<http://gardenandgun.com/media/playlist-must-hear-songs-2014>)

Tags: [Music](#) ([taxonomy/term/573](#))