

A Very Vocal Playlist



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Listening to soulful break-up songs stirred a craving for more soul music and I rediscovered bands like Sonia Dada, Dirty Projectors

I'D NEVER have thought songs about breaking up could be so sonically joyous if I hadn't heard Fitz and The Tantrums' debut extended play album titled *Songs For A Break Up Volume I*. Fitz And The Tantrums are a Los Angeles band and their debut work is actually downloadable for free off their website. They're a soul band that recreates the purity of the sound of that genre as it was in the nineteen-sixties and seventies.

Soul is all about vocals and Fitz, the frontman of the band and its lead singer, performs the songs in a way that recalls Motown retro but with a contemporary feel. Co-vocalist Noelle Scaggs is equally good and the music has the deep throbbing basslines, saxophone, flute, drums and keyboards that make it expansive yet somehow garage-y too. Fitz and The Tantrums is a band I'm going to watch.

Listening to Fitz and his band do enjoyable soulful 'breaking up songs', stirred a craving for more soul music, so I scoured my embarrassingly disorganised CD racks till I found two CDs by Sonia Dada. They're a band from Chicago and have been around for nearly 20 years. Formed when Daniel Pritzker, songwriter and guitarist, got off a subway train and heard three buskers harmonising and eventually recruited the trio (Michael Scott, Sam Hogan and Paris Delane), Sonia Dada make a very infectious blend of soul, blues, rock and gospel. Of the two albums I have, the eponymous *Sonia Dada* (1994) is by far the better one, showcasing the band's harmonising prowess as well as Pritzker's songwriting talent. Often touring with six to eight members, Sonia Dada's songs, while essentially soul tunes, can be easily accessed by ears used to rock music. That's what I think sets them apart from other soul bands. Listen just once to *You Don't Treat Me No Good* from their first album and chances are you'll get hooked to the band.

I'm not sure Sonia Dada have released anything after *...Barefoot Soul* (2002), which I have, and *Test Pattern* (2004), and I don't even know whether they still tour but there are few better options than their music if you want to immerse yourself in rock-influenced soul.

I mentioned soul being all about vocals. But what about an experimental rock band that uses vocals to create exquisite and unexpected music? Dirty Projectors, a Brooklyn (New York) based band, are a brainchild of Dave Longstreth, a Yale graduate (who dropped out first and then went back and completed his course in music) and use multiple vocal harmonies so perfect in unison that it makes you wonder whether it's all a recording studio gimmick. In fact, (and you soon realise this when you hear the Projectors' live recordings), it is all real. Three vocalists are what makes up the band and their latest record *Bitte Orca* (2009) has been praised by Pitchforkmedia (which gave it 9.2 out of 10) but I'd recommend the



BLENDERS' PRIDE

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THREE TO TANGO

Beginning this installment, I'll recommend three downloads in every column. Here are this week's reccos:

The Mclovin's: Twenty-something trio that started as a Phish cover band and now does its own jamming.

Thao Nguyen: Alternative folk-rocker from Virginia, US, who began playing when she was 12 and is one to watch.

Truman Peyote: A fun electronica/dance band whose single *New Wife, New Life*, rocks.

You can get the links on the web version



VOCAL HARMONY

Bitte Orca (2009) is the latest album by Dirty Projectors, a New York-based experimental rock band

crazier *Rise Above* (2007). If the name is familiar, it's because that's the name of American pioneering hardcore band, Black Flag's song on their debut album, *Damaged* (1981).

That's not a coincidence. *Rise Above* is Longstreth's interpretation or rather, as some reviewer called it, misremembering of *Damaged*, song for song. Now, if you've heard Black Flag's minimalist hardcore punk, you'll never even dream that their songs could be interpreted by a trio of vocalists singing in unison and harmony. Rich embellishments – African guitars, sudden bursts of chamber music and even some R&B – transform the songs completely and little by way of the original tunes remains. If you listen carefully, then you can recognise the lyrics but otherwise the album is almost another original. Longstreth's own voice is sweet but unusual and the female harmonies are as if they've been precision-synthesised on computers. I made a Black Flag fan listen to Dirty Projectors' version of *Six Pack*. He couldn't even recognise it. But he enjoyed it. So something obviously works. And I'd put it down to the exquisite vocals.

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