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Morrison, Mattea, more out this week

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Morrison, Moby and Mattea all hit record stores with new releases today.

THAT'S ENTRAINMENT: Van Morrison has a novel new expression and song for what he does - "That's Entrainment." It suggests a kind of enchantment or trancelike state that comes on for listeners when we get caught up in the spirit of his moody, heartfelt, often incantational music. And yes, there's plenty to be had on Van the Man's new album, "**Keep It Simple**" (**Lost Highway, B+**), from whence that tune springs.

But first, chill.

There are no brassy show horns or blistering rockers on board this time. This is not a "road" album to crank up in the car. The operative words here are subtle, laid back, lulling. It's a production more in the organic, slow blues-meets-Woodstock country spirit of Morrison's classic "Tupelo Honey," warmed by the glow of a Hammond organ, shuffling percussion, softly picked and strummed guitars, and lots of interplay between Van's nuanced, wisdom-filled vocals and his small choir of gospel-laced backup singers.

When played in a quiet environment or heard on earphones, "Keep It Simple" charms with its peace and comfort, with the life experiences Morrison shares - from the preacher's lament, "How Can A Poor Boy," which suggests "You don't believe anything that's true" to the Ray Charles-inspired "(Ain't gonna change) No Thing" to Van's definition of "Soul" as "a feeling deep within. Soul is not the color of your skin."

Also just out and apt for fans is "**Van Morrison Under Review 1964-1974**" (**MVD/Chrome Dreams, B**), a two-hour DVD documentary which focuses on the Belfast Cowboy's first and arguably most vital decade as a Northern Soul singer/songwriter - first fronting Them, then going solo. There are loads of clips (brief) of Morrison in concert, and also of his influences - from Leadbelly to Woody Guthrie to Louis Armstrong. The narrative is carried largely by seasoned Irish and British music critics who ain't afraid to point out Morrison's clunker notes as well as the killers.

WHEN IT RAINS, IT POURS: Two other strong releases this week also abide by a stripped-down, all-country aesthetic. The **Wood Brothers' "Loaded"** (**Blue Note, B**) sometimes suggests a male counterpart to the countrypolitan work of Norah Jones. Singer-guitarist Oliver Wood digs the earth, while his bass-playing brother, Chris (best known as part of the jazzbo Medeski, Martin & Wood), plays with fire. John Medeski produced the set, and Philly guy Amos Lee is among the guests.

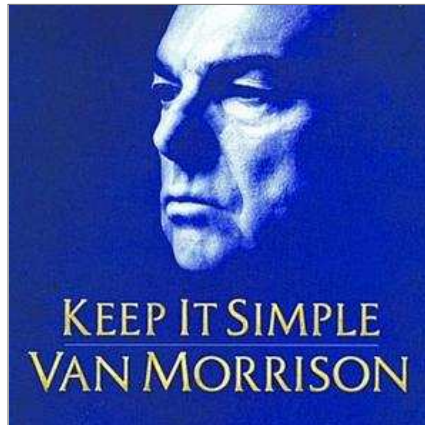
Once upon a time, every country picker/singer worth his or her salt had at least one song to share about the hard-scrapple, death-defying life of American coal miners. **Kathy Mattea** hasn't added to the repertoire, but this Coalwood, W.V., native sure grew up in that environment - even working her way through college digging in the mines. Now on "**Coal**" (**Captain Potato/Thirty Tigers, B+**) she gathers others' beast-of-burden ballads for a history lesson that bears repeating. Highlights include Merle Travis' "Dark as a Dungeon," Darrell Scott's "You'll Never Leave Harlan Alive" and an amazing, a cappella read of Hazel Dickens' "Black Lung."

ROCK STOPS: The **Raconteurs** are a sideline project that's become as big as their primary gig for front guys Jack White (White Stripes) and power popster Brendan Benson. Their second album, "**Consolers of the Lonely**" (**Warner Bros., B+**), was rushed to stores less than a month after completion and repeatedly tips its hat to classic rock icons like The Who (title track), the Kinks ("Old Enough") and an unleaded, acoustic Zeppelin ("Top Yourself" and "These Stones Will Shout").

But the band knows to never overlap its obvious hand, repeatedly changing things up mid-song. The convoluted tale of "The Switch and the Spur," for example, mixes Spanish and spaghetti Western brass flavors with those hints of Pete Townshend-like guitar, while the "You Really Got Me" -ish, show-boatin' riffs of "Five on the Five" are offset by White's wired-to-hysteria vocal.

Pittsburgh's gift to political-punk, **Anti-Flag**, is still priming the pumps for social change on "**The Bright Lights of America**" (**RCA/BMG, B**). Yet with the help of producer Tony Visconti (of David Bowie, T. Rex and Morrissey fame), they've made the sound bigger, bolder and just a tad slicker.

Now their diatribes about the ship going down have a more anthemic, sing-along feel - more Clash consciousness, if you will.



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There's nothing all that Gaelic about **French Kicks** except maybe their swagger, as the the band goes "**Swimming**" (**Vagrant, digital download, B**). Still, I do like their other-otherworldly inflections - Asian, Afro-pop and overall artsy. Think Bono fronting the Talking Heads. And catch 'em Saturday at Johnny Brenda's.

Moby sure wants you up and dancing on "**Last Night**" (**Mute, B-**), a set that takes him back to his electronica/DJ roots. Guest vocalists include MC Grandmaster Caz (one of the writers of "Rappers Delight") and Smokey and S.O. Simple of the Nigerian hip-hop group 419 Squad. A mile wide, inches deep.

Apples In Stereo has gathered lost tracks and leftovers as "**Electronic Projects for Musicians**" (**Yep Roc, B-**). So that's why they call them B-sides.

INSTRUMENTAL TO CHANGE: Master guitar shredder **Joe Satriani** shows off his more lyrical side on "**Professor Satchafunkilus and the Musterion of Rock**" (**Epic, B**).

The classically trained string and piano players of the **Ahn Trio** are onto something lovely, lyrical and fairly broad in appeal on "**Lullaby for My Favorite Insomniac**" (**Sony BMG, B+**). The chill-out session features a tricked-out treatment of an Astor Piazzolla tango, a touching "My Funny Valentine," a bunch of neo-classical tunes that all go down easy, and a haunting treatment of the Pat Metheny/David Bowie "This Is Not America." *

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