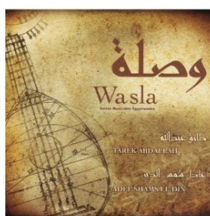


SONGLINES

THE BEST

ALBUMS OF

Editors Jo Frost and Simon Broughton have selected ten releases reviewed this year that have warranted repeated listening and left a lasting impression



Tarek Abdallah & Adel Shams El-Din
Wasla

(Buda) Reviewed in #107

This is a remarkable record, but I've also picked it because I've twice seen how well they perform live. The ingredients are simple: Tarek Abdallah is one of the best Egyptian *oud* players and Adel Shams El-Din, who has played with many great masters and is genius on the *riqq* (tambourine), which gives the music its backbone. This album is a statement of faith in the contemporary power of traditional Arabic music – creating large suites, or *wasla*, around particular *maqams* (Eastern modes). As Abdallah says, “classical Arabic music is about innovation.” *SB*



Lila Downs
Balas y Chocolate

(Sony Music) Reviewed in #112

As 2015 has been the Year of Mexico in the UK, we've seen a sprinkling of Mexican performers in town – masked wrestlers Luche Libre and the Ballet Folklorico de Mexico – although, sadly, not the remarkable Lila Downs. From her groundbreaking *Tree of Life*, through her contributions to the Oscar-winning *Frida* soundtrack, to this celebration of the tragedy and joy of Mexico with its Day of the Dead artwork, Downs has been one of the most arresting artists from Latin America. The title translates as ‘Bullets and Chocolate’ with musical nods to *mariachi*, *corrido* and a guest appearance from superstar Juanes. *SB*



Tigran Hamasyan & the Yerevan State Chamber Choir
Luys i Luso

(ECM) Reviewed in #113

Armenian pianist Tigran Hamasyan is well-known in the jazz world, but having relocated from the US to Armenia, this album really goes into his roots. Rather like Jan Garbarek with the Hilliard Ensemble, he improvises over sacred Armenian hymns and chants. The Yerevan State Chamber Choir sing pieces ranging from fifth-century Mesrop Mashtots to 20th-century Komitas, with Hamasyan adding sometimes minimal piano touches and sometimes impassioned outbursts. But he always lets the choral music speak. *SB*



Seckou Keita
22 Strings

(ARC Music) Reviewed in #109

This is one of two *kora* albums picked this year – and like Ballaké Sissoko, Seckou has featured on our Best Of lists before (in 2013), for his duo with the Welsh harpist Catrin Finch. But this is an extremely personal piece of work, named after the 22-stringed *kora* that still exists in Seckou's home region of Casamance, in southern Senegal. The gorgeous and elegant sound he creates belies the fact that it's just him – at times it sounds like he's got several *koras* backing him. Seckou also shows off his vocal skills on a couple of tracks, including the delightfully serene ‘Mandé’, a praise song to his Keita ancestors. *JF*



Sam Lee & Friends
The Fade in Time

(Nest Collective Records) Reviewed in #107

There's been no shortage of terrific British and Irish folk releases this year, but Sam Lee's second album is for me, the most original. With its intriguing instrumentation (trumpet, Jew's harp, cello, shruti box, dulcimer and percussion) through to the snippets of archival recordings, Lee's sensitive and expressive voice brings to life the songs he has collected from travellers across England, Scotland and Ireland. A hugely engaging performer, Lee is a man on a mission to dispel the stuffy image of the song collector and share the fascinating tales he's unearthed on his travels. *JF*