

# Johnny, Be Good Tonight

The 100 Greatest Songs of All Time

1<sup>st</sup> Edition

by  
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## **Preface**

When I was seventeen, I scribbled down the first edition of what would become this list. I had listened with great interest as my hometown classic rock station counted down their annual Memorial Day 500, only to hit my buzzer when I discovered that listeners had voted “Sweet Emotion” by Aerosmith number one. (Love the song, just not as number one. On any list.)

Actually, the entire list sucked: “Layla” was number 25 and “Stairway to Heaven” was number 18, and if I remember correctly, the top five was: “Carry On Wayward Son” (!), “La Grange,” “Black Dog,” “Another Brick in the Wall (Part 2),” and, yes, “Sweet Emotion.” I rolled my eyes and told myself, “I can do better than that,” and quickly wrote down 25 favorites.

By later in the summer, I had fleshed out the list to 100, and listened to them with my dad as we drove to and from the beach on my iPod equipped with the iTrip FM transmitter. By the fall, I had revised the list further, and by happy coincidence had signed up to take an elective class called Ragtime, Rap and the Rolling Stones. I showed the list to my teacher, whom I already knew fairly well, and I remember she was impressed by it.

(She also gave me a look of wide-eyed shock when I correctly identified Miles Davis' “Freddie Freeloader” when she played it for us on the first day of class. I certainly was no longer the same kid who had filled in “Limp Bizkit” as his favorite band in her sixth grade chorus class, though to be fair, I had only been listening to music for like three months at that point in my life.)

After another round of revisions, I sent the list to the editor of the school newspaper, who had expressed an interest in featuring it. That's the first public exposure my list ever received. (Good luck tracking that edition of it down.) By the spring, I had revised it some more, and I published it as a webpage on a site called Squidoo, which had just been profiled in the *New York Times* as a groundbreaking site that paid the makers of its pages royalties.

I never thought -- ever -- that anybody would look at it. At most, I thought my friends and family might look at it, but given the constant struggle it was to get them to listen to the “right” music, I didn't think I would really succeed at getting them to do that. Well, I was wrong. The number of unique visitors to that page numbers in the millions, and people still contact me on a regular basis to thank me for putting together that list.

As you'll read next in the introduction, I eventually grew dissatisfied with the list I posted on Squidoo over seven years ago now, and this is my latest take on it.

I have found that a surprising number of my readers ask me pretty frequently if I still work on this list, which I always find rather curious. (If you like the list so much, why would you want me to update/change it?) But it comes up more often than you'd think.

I have also been surprised by how many ask if I can offer the list in book form. I guess I have a different perspective on the list than everyone else, so I have always shrugged off the suggestion, thinking a book version would just be redundant, but now that I have put this book together, I'm very happy with it, and I hope you are, too. (By the way, check the back for the original list.)

## **Introduction**

I started tinkering with my list of the 100 greatest songs of all time when I was in high school, publishing it on the Internet as an 18-year-old who was readying himself for college. I knew a lot about music back then, to be sure -- especially for someone my age -- but by no means enough to produce anywhere close to a definitive list of the greatest songs of all time.

Shortly after I got to college I updated the list, expanding it to 200. (Actually, I left the original list up and simply created a new page.) I was still discovering a lot of new music back then and my taste and musical sensibilities hadn't solidified quite yet, so it made sense for me to do it at the time.

At the time I finished the 200 songs list, I wanted to keep going with it, expanding it to 300. Followers of my work -- if you can call it that -- will know that list never came to fruition, for a lot of reasons.

I became much more interested in the album format, since that's the pop music artist's truest form of expression. We live in an album age, though that will probably change sooner than we all think -- albums are expensive to make and are hard to sell in an era of free streaming. When someone releases new music, it's always in the form of an album.

(Seriously, standalone singles are incredibly rare now. Even if they do see the light of day, they'll be licensed to a soundtrack or something. You never see a situation like the Beatles in '68, where they said, "Hmm. *The White Album's* taking a while. Let's give them "Hey Jude.")

I got so into albums that a year ago [I made a list of my 100 favorite albums](#), which was fun and cool but I soon discovered after completing that list that most people don't listen to albums, and if they do, it's not really to appreciate art or anything, it's usually just a means of entertaining themselves for an hour.

I spent six months basically writing a book, leaving no stone unturned in giving each album on the list its own detailed entry. But even though albums are a lot more interesting and rewarding than individual songs are, most people don't seem to be willing to give them their due. That's just the way it is.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. To get back to why I didn't expand my greatest songs of all time list to 300, well, I got into playing the guitar when I was in college, and I was studying film back then too, so I watched a ton of movies, which took up a lot of time.

The "what are the greatest songs of all time" question became less and less interesting to me; it was kind of a "been there, done that" thing. For a couple of years when I was 17-18, the "greatest songs of all time" question felt very relevant to me. Ever since, it hasn't.

Every once in a while, I'll dig out the list -- meaning, I'll click on the "top 100" playlist on my iTunes -- and give it a look. Every year or two I probably do that. If I still basically agree with it, I don't mess with it. If I think it needs an update, I'll update it. That's basically how I approach list-making -- they're all works in progress.

This is only my second update to the list since I expanded it to 200. The first update to the list was in 2010, right as I was graduating college. It made sense at the time for me to do it. I was entering a new phase of my life then, and I wasn't happy with the original list, since my taste had changed and I had a better understanding of the pop narrative.

I thought, at the time, that that was going to be the last update. By this time, the list had gotten over a million views and was ranking at the top of the Google SERP for "greatest songs of all time" ahead of *Rolling Stone's* list, which I was proud of. Part of me just wanted to leave the original as is just for the hell of it.

But another part of me didn't like the list itself anymore and hated the little bits of commentary I had written for each song even more, since I had gotten a lot better at writing and wasn't happy with the idea that there was such sloppily written work bearing my name on the internet for the whole world to see.

So I updated the song order, deleted the commentary, and thought that would be the end of it. But some of my readers have complained to me that they liked the commentary. (Some liked the original list better than the 2010 version, as well.)

And in 2013, I suddenly found myself in a mood to start messing with the greatest songs of all time list. For one thing, I realized I had a new #1, and if there's a rule I have when it comes to updating a list, it's to not bother unless you have a different #1 pick.

Also, tremendous advances have been made in playlist interactivity, so I am pleased to announce that you may listen to this list as a Spotify playlist. I have made two separate playlists, one in descending order -- which will appear first, since the list descends -- and another in ascending order.

(Obviously, not all of the songs on the list are on Spotify -- the Beatles, Led Zeppelin and some other artists are still holding out on the streaming game -- so you won't be able to listen to them here, either. But 84 of them are.)

By the way, the commentary is back. I didn't think it was necessary to do it last time, but you guys let me know it was a crucial part of the first list and so I have responded. (I try to be a man of the people.) I have tried to keep each one to around 3-5 sentences each. Some are just one or two.

I'm also giving you guys a huge bonus: I'm recommending five additional songs per track on the list. (Yeah, 500 total.) These songs are related in some way in some way to the main selections -- whether by artist, genre and/or time period -- and hopefully will help flesh out my choices better as well as give you more ideas of what else is out there to listen to.

So yeah, this is a pretty huge jukebox of songs that you're getting. I've done the work to put all this together so this can serve as a resource for everyone.

I really think the music industry and consumers alike will start -- if they haven't already -- relying on "tastemakers" who will act as something of a bridge between the two camps. (And there will likely be money in it for them -- record companies will start marketing directly to the tastemakers who have amassed a substantial following.)

Right now the entire music industry is in disarray, despite the fact that demand for content is, as far as I can tell, as high as it has ever been and there are as many -- if not more -- artists trying to make it as musicians now. Yet it has become harder for musicians to make money *and* arguably even tougher for consumers to even find music they like (much less spend money on).

In recent years it has become necessary for tastemakers to "curate" the content; right now there are so many voices in the choir that many consumers now don't even *try* to find music they might like. ("Too many voices in the choir" = too much music being made + too many ways of finding it.) It's made for a disorienting and disappointing consumer experience, that's for sure.

My original Squidoo list in 2006 was my initial foray into the realm of tastemaking, though I didn't know it at the time. I think the role of tastemaker has always been one I have wanted to play; I have always resisted the title of "critic" whenever anyone has tried to bestow it upon me or has encouraged me to become one.

One, I'm not really qualified -- at least not to the extent that a critic *should* be, in my opinion -- and two, music critics tend to be smug, which I don't like.

At any rate, here we go. Let's curate some damn content.

– Eric



## #100

### The Verve – “Bitter Sweet Symphony” (1997)

GENRE: Britpop

LABEL: Hut

WRITTEN BY: Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, Richard Ashcroft

PRODUCED BY: Martin "Youth" Glover, The Verve

The alternative revolution was an important one, and I wanted Britpop -- England's reaction to American grunge -- to be represented on the list. Hard to go wrong with “Bitter Sweet Symphony,” right?

Appears on: *Urban Hymns* (1997)

Recommended listening:

- The Stone Roses - "She Bangs the Drums" (1989)
- Suede [UK] / The London Suede [US] - "Animal Nitrate" (1993)
- Blur - "Girls & Boys" (1994)
- Oasis - "Live Forever" (1994)
- The Verve - "Sonnet" (1997)

## #99

### **Buffalo Springfield – “For What It's Worth” (1967)**

GENRE: Folk Rock

LABEL: Atco

WRITTEN BY: Stephen Stills

PRODUCED BY: N/A

Before Neil Young was on his own (and, briefly, in CSNY), he played in Buffalo Springfield with Stephen Stills. This protest song is their most lasting cut.

Recommended listening:

- Crosby, Stills & Nash - "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" (1969)
- Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young - "Ohio" (1970)
- Neil Young - "Heart of Gold" (1972)
- Neil Young - "Cortez the Killer" (1975)
- Neil Young & Crazy Horse - "My My, Hey Hey (Out of the Blue)" (1979)

## #98

### **James Taylor – “Fire and Rain” (1970)**

GENRE: Folk Rock

LABEL: Warner Bros.

WRITTEN BY: James Taylor

PRODUCED BY: Peter Asher

This song is so good it pretty much defines James Taylor, which isn't necessarily a good thing. Meanwhile, none other than Carole King plays the piano on the recording; she worked as a songwriter/session musician before hitting it big with her *Tapestry* album in '71.

Appears on: *Sweet Baby James* (1970)

Recommended listening:

- Joni Mitchell - "Both Sides, Now" (1969)
- Carole King - "I Feel the Earth Move" (1971)
- Carole King - "It's Too Late" (1971)
- Joni Mitchell - "All I Want" (1971)
- Tracy Chapman - "Fast Car" (1988)

## #97

### **Adele – “Rolling in the Deep” (2010)**

GENRE: Pop

LABEL: XL [UK] / Columbia [US]

WRITTEN BY: Adele, Paul Epworth

PRODUCED BY: Paul Epworth

Adele is already considered something of a generational figure to us Millennials, and I am confident that years from now both “Rolling in the Deep” and her diamond-selling album *21* will be considered once-in-a-generation phenomena, like Nirvana’s *Nevermind* and “Smells Like Teen Spirit” were for Generation X.

Appears on: *21* (2011)

Recommended listening:

- Adele - "Chasing Pavements" (2008)
- Adele - "Hometown Glory" (2008)
- Adele - "Lovesong" (2011)
- Adele - "Rumour Has It" (2011)
- Adele - "Someone Like You" (2011)

## #96

### **Bill Haley and His Comets – “(We're Gonna) Rock Around the Clock” (1954)**

GENRE: Rock & Roll

LABEL: Decca

WRITTEN BY: Max C. Freedman, James E. Myers

PRODUCED BY: Milt Gabler

There were three candidates for this, the birth-of-rock-and-roll slot: "Rock Around the Clock" and two Elvis Presley cuts from his Sun Records tenure, "That's All Right" and "Mystery Train." In the end I picked this one, since Elvis has other appearances later on the list and, relatively speaking, "That's All Right" and "Mystery Train" aren't as good as his later material, even if they -- especially "That's All Right" -- were crucial.

Recommended listening:

- Hank Williams - "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" (1949)
- Muddy Waters - "Rollin' Stone" (1950)
- Elvis Presley - "That's All Right" (1954)
- Elvis Presley - "Mystery Train" (1955)
- Johnny Cash - "I Walk the Line" (1956)

## #95

### **DJ Shadow – “Midnight in a Perfect World” (1996)**

GENRE: Trip-Hop

LABEL: Mo' Wax

WRITTEN BY: Josh Davis, Baraka, Pekka Pohjola

PRODUCED BY: DJ Shadow

*Endtroducing...*, the album on which “Midnight” appears, is considered a breakthrough in popular music, as it was created entirely from samples stitched together in a finely textured and complex 63-minute narrative. Most of its tracks are too unwieldy for such a list as this one, but “Midnight in a Perfect World” is a -- indeed, perhaps *the* -- glorious exception.

Appears on: *Endtroducing...* (1996)

Recommended listening:

- DJ Shadow - "Building Steam with a Grain of Salt" (1996)
- DJ Shadow - "Changeling" (1996)
- DJ Shadow - "Napalm Brain / Scatter Brain" (1996)
- DJ Shadow - "Stem / Long Stem" (1996)
- DJ Shadow - "What Does Your Soul Look Like (Part 1 - Blue Sky Revisit)" (1996)

## #94

### **Dire Straits - "Sultans of Swing" (1978)**

GENRE: Roots Rock

LABEL: Vertigo

WRITTEN BY: Mark Knopfler

PRODUCED BY: Muff Winwood

There were three songs on this list that I simply couldn't part with because they're just too good, and this is one of them. A lot of what appears on my list can probably be filed under "classic rock," but only this one marries the slick fingerpicking of guitarist Mark Knopfler with the impeccable production of the Dire Straits.

Appears on: *Dire Straits* (1978)

Recommended listening:

- Steely Dan - "Reelin' in the Years" (1972)
- Steely Dan - "Show Biz Kids" (1973)
- Steely Dan - "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" (1974)
- Dire Straits - "Southbound Again" (1978)
- Dire Straits - "Money for Nothing" (1985)

## #93

### **The Mamas and the Papas – “California Dreamin’” (1965)**

GENRE: Pop

LABEL: Dunhill

WRITTEN BY: John Phillips, Michelle Phillips

PRODUCED BY: Lou Adler

Any kid who has ever grown up on the east coast of the United States can relate to this one. Something that I didn't notice until a friend pointed it out (it's kind of hidden in plain sight): when the Mamas repeat each line during the verses, they're actually singing an entirely different melody; they don't harmonize with the Papas except sporadically during the chorus. It's what gives the song its driving momentum.

Appears on: *If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears* (1966)

Recommended listening:

- The Byrds - "I'll Feel a Whole Lot Better" (1965)
- The Byrds - "Mr. Tambourine Man" (1965)
- The Byrds - "Turn! Turn! Turn!" (1965)
- The Mamas and the Papas - "Monday, Monday" (1966)
- The Byrds - "Hickory Wind" (1968)



## #92

### **Eminem – “Lose Yourself” (2002)**

GENRE: Hip-Hop

LABEL: Shady

WRITTEN BY: Marshall Mathers, Luis Resto, Jeff Bass

PRODUCED BY: Eminem, Jeff Bass

I remember this one quite well. It caught fire instantly, topping the charts across the globe within weeks, and it’s still a blast to listen to even now. Abusive overplay has rendered “Lose Yourself” somewhat trite, to put it mildly, but I remain bullish on its greatness -- listening to it for the first time in a while always gets the adrenaline pumping all over again.

Appears on: *8 Mile* [Soundtrack] (2002)

Recommended listening:

- Dr. Dre feat. Snoop Doggy Dogg - "Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang" (1992)
- Snoop Doggy Dogg - "Gin and Juice" (1993)
- 2Pac feat. Dr. Dre - "California Love" (1995)
- Eminem - "Stan" (2000)
- OutKast - "Hey Ya!" (2003)

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