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The Ultimate Play List

WHAT ARE THE BEST SPORTS SONGS OF ALL TIME? IT'S TIME TO FACE THE MUSIC

GREG KELLY

Music and sports are so intertwined it's hard to imagine one without the other. Boston fans sing "Tessie" and "Sweet Caroline" to rally the Red Sox. The Alan Parsons Project greets the Bulls. "One Shining Moment" gift-wraps the Final Four. The action on the field has a built-in sound track—a perfect score.

It works the other way too: Sports is infused in music as much as music is infused in sports. Last year John Fogerty was honored at the National Baseball Hall of Fame on the 25th anniversary of "Centerfield." This month singer-songwriter Terry Cashman will receive the same nod for "Talkin' Baseball." In recent years Fenway Park has been a literal bandbox, hosting shows by Springsteen and the Stones, among others; in 2005, Jimmy Buffett (a monster Cubs fan and part-owner of a minor league team) played the first concert at Wrigley Field. Joe Frazier crooned, Bernie Williams strums, Ron Artest and Kobe Bryant rap (unfortunately) and former defensive tackle Mike Reid churns out beautiful country melodies. And the list of artists with sports-themed songs spans the breadth of popular music: Bob Dylan, Jay-Z, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Common, New Order, Miles Davis, the Pogues, Snoop Dogg . . . and on and on.

That is the rich vein from which SI has mined its first collection of Sports' Greatest Hits. These aren't stadium anthems (no Gary Glitter here) or novelties (sorry, "Super Bowl Shuffle"). These are songs by serious artists who used sports as subject and metaphor, rated for both the music and their message. Many are by great storytellers with wonderful tales to tell.

The philosopher Umberto Eco said we like lists because they bring order to chaos and make us feel immortal. And we know that rock 'n' roll will never die. Read on, then, and live forever.

1 WHO KILLED DAVEY MOORE?

Bob Dylan, 1963

"This is a song about a boxer," the always enigmatic Dylan said when he introduced this ballad at his landmark Lincoln Center performance in 1964. "It's got nothing to do with boxing." That's true, in the same way that *Moby Dick* has nothing to do with whaling. Still, "Who Killed Davey Moore?" remains a searing indictment of the fight game to this day.

Moore was a 29-year-old featherweight champion from Springfield, Ohio, when he defended his title against a heavy-punching Cuban émigré named Sugar Ramos on March 21, 1963. A crowd of more than 25,000 filled Dodger Stadium, which was less than a year old and hosting its first fight night. Moore gave nearly as good as he got, but in the 10th round he was knocked to the canvas for the second time, his head snapping against the bottom rope, and the referee ruled a knockout. Moore was able to talk to reporters for 40 minutes after the fight, laughing and joking about a rematch. A short time later, however, the swelling in his injured brain stem sent him into a coma from which he never awakened. He died three days later.

In the song, which Dylan performed for the first time less than three weeks after the fight, several characters deny their culpability in Moore's death. The referee, the fight fan, the manager, the gambler, the sportswriter, the opponent all sing, "No, you can't blame me at all." But the prick to the consciences of all involved—and to the listener's—is inescapable.

Little changed after the fight. There were Senate hearings and calls for boxing reform after Moore's death, and the ring ropes were made safer as a result, but the sport goes right on. Not at one venue, though. In the 48 years since Davey Moore's death, there has never been another fight card at Dodger Stadium.

2 SURFIN' USA

The Beach Boys, 1963

Think about where surfing would be without the Beach Boys. (And don't listen to surfing purists, who'll say, "Better off." They just want

uncrowded waves.) In 1959 there were an estimated 5,000 surfers worldwide. Four years later there were two million, almost all of them in California. The movie *Gidget*, in '59, helped launch the craze, but the Beach Boys, who first hit the local L.A. charts with "Surfin' " in 1961, broadcast the sport's siren song all over the world, giving the craze its anthem.

Oddly enough, Brian Wilson, the Pied Piper of surf mania and the eccentric genius who wrote the Beach Boys' songs and meticulously crafted their sound, was deathly afraid of the water. But he had a role model close at hand—his brother Dennis. "Dennis wasn't really a musician in the beginning," says Domenic Priore, the author of *Pop Surf Culture*. "He really did fix up cars and race them, and he surfed a ton, so Brian primarily was writing songs about Dennis's lifestyle." Safe in his room, Wilson cranked out hit after hit about surfers, souped-up cars, summertime fun and girls in bikinis. "Surfin' USA" was the song that launched the band into national stardom.

3 ALL KINDS OF TIME

Fountains of Wayne, 2003

Adam Schlesinger, the bassist for the ironic indie band Fountains of Wayne, is an unusually versatile songwriter. He's been nominated for a Grammy (for the song "Stacy's Mom"), an Oscar (*That Thing You Do*), a Tony (*Cry-Baby*) and an Emmy (*A Colbert Christmas*). But of all his compositions, "All Kinds of Time" might be his most satisfying. "Every once in a while a song turns out better than you expected," he says, "and that's what it felt like with this one."

It begins with a sportswriting cliché—a young quarterback with "all kinds of time"—and turns into a moving ballad about youth, zen calm and coming through in the clutch. On a crucial drive the young QB drops back and, as tacklers close in on the pocket, finds time slowing down. Suddenly, he knows just what to do. He finds his open receiver, and the whole world is his. "I thought of that phrase all kinds of time, and taking it literally," says Schlesinger, who describes himself as a casual football fan. "I wanted to pick one little moment in a game and see if I could stretch it out for the length of an entire song. NFL Films was the inspiration, pretty much. I just thought of it with that super slo-mo vibe." That made it all the more satisfying when a few years ago the NFL used the song in a commercial with footage of iconic quarterbacks. "That was all I had really wanted for that song," Schlesinger says.

4 RACING IN THE STREETS

Bruce Springsteen, 1978

There are deliberate echoes of earlier muscle-car tunes in the opening lines: "I got a '69 Chevy with a 396/Fuelie heads and a Hurst on the floor." "I wanted my street racers to carry the years between the car songs of the '60s and 1978 America," Springsteen wrote in his book *Songs*. Those years haven't been kind to the Boss's racer, who is desperately holding on to his youth, a crummy job and the girl he won over three years earlier with his hot car. Author Nick Hornby calls "Racing" one of Springsteen's bleakest songs—which is saying something. But for its magic of summoning an entire world of street racing in under seven minutes, it's a powerful piece of songwriting.

5 THE BOXER

Simon & Garfunkel, 1969

When New York City was knocked onto the canvas in the weeks after Sept. 11, 2001, Paul Simon played this classic about a troubled pugilist on the first episode of *Saturday Night Live* following the terrorist attacks. Simon sings that, despite being discouraged and down on his luck, "the fighter still remains" and refuses to leave the city—the perfect message of perseverance for a country struggling to get back on its feet after absorbing a brutal blow. Simon told *Playboy* in 1984 that the boxer in the song was really a metaphor for himself, a way of describing his reaction when the enormously popular Simon and Art Garfunkel started to get negative feedback from music critics in the late 1960s. "Everybody's beating me up," he said, "and I'm telling you now I'm going to go away if you don't stop."

6 FIFTY MISSION CAP

The Tragically Hip, 1992

This clever rocker tells the story of Bill Barilko, a Maple Leafs defenseman who scored only five goals in 47 career playoff games but made his last one count: He won the 1951 Stanley Cup with an overtime score against the Canadiens. Barilko disappeared weeks later, presumed lost in a small-plane crash on his way home from a fishing trip. The Leafs' fortunes plummeted as well. They wouldn't win another Cup until 1962—the same year Barilko's body was found in the wild.

7 CENTERFIELD

John Fogerty, 1985

Fogerty was in a slump in 1985. He hadn't put out an album in more than a decade and was mired in litigation with an old record company. Like a desperate ballplayer, he needed a hit. "As I thought about different things that were special or important to me," he says, "I remembered the idea of centerfield I'd had as a kid."

When Fogerty was growing up in Berkeley, Calif., "My dad and my uncles would talk about Joe DiMaggio and their eyes would get real big," he says. "I got the idea that centerfield at Yankee Stadium must be the center of the universe and the coolest of all places. I said, 'That's it, I want to be in centerfield.' "

Centerfield became the name of the album, but it didn't occur to Fogerty until most of the tracks were finished that adding a song about the position would make it perfect. The album went double platinum and was No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts—a certified home run.

8 HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Common, 1997

The Chicago-born rapper gets inside the head of a high school hoops star and presents a haunting interior monologue about the promises and pitfalls of being an NBA wannabe. Hoop dreams can be a blessing and a curse for kids looking to escape the inner city: "For the game of life, full courts ain't preppin' us/Schools want me, but the ghost of Manigault haunts me." The baller's interest in a life of letters, though, is limited to luxury cars (SEs and GSs, he says); he's aware of the tragic example of Len Bias, but he chooses to ignore those lessons ("Either rich poor or Mike is who I wanna be like/Story of many black males that I refuse to rewrite"). Common, who also starred as a fictional New Jersey Net in the 2010 movie *Just Wright*, knows his pro hoops. His father, Lonnie Lynn, played for the ABA's Pittsburgh Pipers.

9 3RD BASE, DODGER STADIUM

Ry Cooder, 2005

Cooder, the producer and guitarist who united a troupe of Cuban musicians for the 1997 album *Buena Vista Social Club*, got a Grammy nomination eight years later for his album *Chavez Ravine*. The record tells the story of the Mexican-Americans displaced from their Los Angeles neighborhood in the 1950s for what was supposed to be a public-housing project, but in a bit of crony capitalism became the Dodgers' home instead. "3rd Base," laid out over a languorous Latin beat, tells the story of a stadium worker fondly remembering his old home, which once stood where third base is.

BONUS TRACK: "There Used to Be a Ballpark," by Frank Sinatra. This 1973 tune has just the opposite sentiment: It laments the demolition of a ballpark to build a housing project.

10 MUHAMMAD ALI

Faithless, 2001

Beneath a tough urban beat, the British dance band tells a sweet tale of a young black kid who becomes more confident by following the example of Ali: "Ten years old suddenly bold/Cause I resolved to live like my hero in the ring." Vocalist Maxi Jazz raps on top of a pulsing bass line. It's a strange mix of Philly soul and British trip-hop, and it works.

11 GOD'S FOOTBALLER

Billy Bragg, 1991

The string arrangement is a bit weepy, but the tune has a spirituality appropriate to its subject: footballer Peter Knowles, who was a promising 24-year-old forward in The Football League in England when he abruptly walked away from the game in 1970. Knowles devoted his life to the Jehovah's Witnesses after he began to feel, as the song says, "The glory of the sports pages/Is but the worship of false idols."

12 BOOM BOOM MANCINI

Warren Zevon, 1987

Most songwriters grapple with the sport's morality in boxing songs. Not Zevon, who takes a swing at those who criticized Mancini after the 1982 death of Korean lightweight Duk Koo Kim, the reigning champ who was pummeled by Mancini, then fell into a coma shortly after the 14-round bout and passed away four days later. "They made hypocrite judgments after the fact," Zevon sings. "But the name of the game is be hit and hit back."

Mancini wasn't so cavalier about the tragedy; after Kim's death he fell into a depression. He was never the same fighter, but he did recover sufficiently to reclaim his lightweight crown in 1984 with a victory over Bobby Chacon—a bout celebrated in Zevon's song. And Mancini was thrilled with Zevon, who died of lung cancer in 2003. "I was a big fan of his," Boom Boom says. "He was alternative before there was such a word. When they told me he'd made a record about me, I was stunned."

13 DUK KOO KIM

Sun Kil Moon, 2003

A different view of the Mancini-Kim fight—from the canvas—is presented in this beautifully melancholy ballad. Indie artist Mark Kozelek took Sun Kil Moon as his nom de musique, a reference to an obscure Korean bantamweight champ from the late 1980s. ("Great images with all three words, Sun Kil Moon," says Kozelek, who's that rare combination of emo rocker and fight fan. "I've probably used those words a thousand times in my songs.") He tells Kim's story in a 14½ minute homage with a Neil Young flavor. Says Kozelek, who has also written tributes to two other fighters who died young, Salvador Sanchez and Pancho Villa, "The Duk Koo Kim tragedy, with his mother and the referee committing suicide afterward—I can't believe there aren't dozens of songs inspired by that. Books and movies are made about these guys, so why not songs?"

14 SONG FOR SONNY LISTON

Mark Knopfler, 2004

It's a bluesy tune that perfectly captures the menace and mystery of the former heavyweight champ, whose death in 1970 was ruled a heroin overdose. The British guitar master sings of Liston's demise, "There was no investigation as such/He hated needles, but he knew too much." As for why he wrote it, Knopfler told *The New York Times*, "I was rooting around in my childhood, maybe the way you do when you get to a certain age. And I suppose Sonny Liston always stuck with me. One of the reasons why sports stays alive in us is that there's part of us that wants to keep the child alive."

15 BALLAD OF BJORN BORG

Pernice Brothers, 2001

Borg won 11 Grand Slam titles, but it's easy to forget how quickly he flamed out. He won his last major tennis tournament the day after his 25th birthday and played only three times after that, sleepwalking into early retirement. Joe Pernice hasn't forgotten. He sets Borg's loss of interest to a dreamy melody that belies the Swedish star's ennui. The song can easily stand as a metaphor for a love affair that's played out.

BONUS TRACK: "Moonshot Manny," also by Joe Pernice, is a catchy, Latin-flavored 2004 tribute to slugger Manny Ramirez.

16 BOXING

Ben Folds Five, 1995

A different look at Muhammad Ali, from later in his life. This is a poignant imagined conversation between the Champ and Howard Cosell as Ali's career is winding down: "My intention's become/Not to lose what I've won/Ambition has given way to desperation." "Boxing might have been a strange subject for a romantic waltz," says Folds. "But when something that's not normal gives me a chill while I'm writing it, even now, I don't question it—I'm thankful."

BONUS TRACK: Check out Bette Midler's cover.

17 SPEEDWAY AT NAZARETH

Mark Knopfler, 2000

A surprising tribute to Indy car racing from Knopfler, who said the song arose from his friendship with Stefan Johansson, a Swedish driver on the Formula 1 and CART circuits in the 1980s and '90s. It chronicles a fictional CART season: The narrator gets put into the wall at Phoenix, drives with three cracked vertebrae in Long Beach and barely qualifies at the Indy 500. His season is finally redeemed with a victory at Nazareth, Pa., the home of Mario Andretti. The song is only inspired by Johansson, though: He never won in more than 75 starts in F1 and CART.

18 FUGUE FOR TINHORNS

Guys and Dolls, 1950

"I got the horse right here/The name is Paul Revere/And here's a guy that says if the weather's clear/Can do, can do." There's never been a better tribute to the degenerate horse player and never will be. Based on the short stories of Damon Runyon and with marvelous music and lyrics by Frank Loesser, the *Guys and Dolls* classic (best when performed by Stubby Kaye) nails the gambler's perpetual—or is it misguided?—optimism.

19 TOURNAMENT OF HEARTS

The Weakerthans, 2007

Who has the greatest song about curling? None other than this Weezer-ish band from Winnipeg. Here the sport of stones and sweepers is both setting and metaphor. Over beers at a bonspiel, a lonely narrator likens his inability to communicate to a curling rock sliding by its target: "Why can't I draw right up to what I want to say/Why can't I ever stop where I want to stay?" Appropriately enough, the tune rocks.

20 TESSIE

Dropkick Murphys, 2004

"Tessie" was originally a Broadway standard from *The Silver Slipper*, a turn-of-the-19th-century play, about a woman singing to her parakeet. But during the first World Series in 1903, between the Boston Americans and the Pittsburgh Pirates, Boston rooters sang it so relentlessly and annoyingly that it was said to distract the Pirates, who blew a 3--1 lead and lost the best-of-nine Series. The Murphys knew their history and released a version—updated with lyrics about the Red Sox—in the summer of 2004. Sure enough, that year Boston pulled off one of the greatest rallies in baseball history, coming back from a 3--0 deficit to beat the Yankees in the ALCS and then winning the team's first World Series in 86 years. In the album's liner notes the band says, "We recorded this song in June 2004 and after giving it to the Red Sox told anyone that would listen that this song would guarantee a World Series victory. Obviously no one listened to us or took us seriously. . . . Luckily for us things turned around for the Red Sox, and the rest is history."

21 HOCKEY

Jane Siberry, 1989

A sports song? While this Canadian singer-songwriter is more closely associated with *Grey's Anatomy* than, say, the Grey Cup, she sings an ethereally sweet and impressionistic tune about the joys of pond hockey. But even shinny can get rough. Siberry drops a couple of f bombs and makes a nice reference to the riots in Montreal after NHL president Clarence Campbell suspended Maurice Richard for the playoffs in 1955 because the Rocket had slugged a ref. (A Canadiens fan later slapped Campbell during a game at the Montreal Forum.) "I remembered the purity of staying outside just to stay outside, the feeling of cold cheeks, sisters picking up and brushing off their younger brother," says Siberry. "The response to the song has been very strong. It seems remembering pure things brings a sense of loss, but it can be a good reminder to weave such joy into our lives."

22 THE HITTER

Bruce Springsteen, 2005

If you think "Racing in the Streets" is bleak, don't look for uplift here. "The Hitter" is right out of John Steinbeck: It follows the rise of a fictional Depression-era fighter and then his crushing downward spiral. In his prime the character beats Jack Thompson, the real-life welterweight champ in the early 1930s. But in the end, after he's wasted his money and been forced to take a dive, he's reduced to pleading with his mother to unlock her door and give him a place to rest awhile. And then he's on the move again:

Tonight in the shipyard, a man draws a circle in the dirt

I move to the center and I take off my shirt

I study him for the cuts, the scars, the pain man nor time can erase

I move hard to the left and I strike to the face.

23 QUEEN'S GAMBIT

GZA and DJ Muggs, 2005

GZA, a founding member of Wu-Tang Clan and widely considered one of rap's top wordsmiths, outdoes himself here, working the name of almost every NFL team—the Falcons missed the cut—into this ballad of sexual bravado. (Note: The explicit content is not for the easily offended.) Admittedly, some of the NFL name dropping is tortured ("She told me to call her if I came to town/I started Texan her soon as my plane had touched down"), but GZA gets credit for the effort, and the lines that work are pay dirt.

24 LAUGHING RIVER

Robert Earl Keen and Greg Brown, 2009

Heartbreak is essential to sad country songs, and whose heart has been stomped on more than a career minor leaguer's? Brown, who wrote the tune, and Keen team up for a bluegrass duet about an aging ballplayer who has spent 20 years in the bushes and is ready to call it quits. His cousin wants to fix him up, and there's a pitch-perfect touch of desperation, pride and hope as the ballplayer says about the potential blind date, "she even saw me play once."

25 MUDFOOTBALL

Jack Johnson, 2001

The celebrated surfer dude specializes in laid-back acoustic rock, and even when his subject is football there's a gentle vibe. This is the kind

of pickup game in the mud that everyone remembers fondly: "Rain is pourin', touchdown scorin'/Keep on rollin', never borin'." But the memories are balanced by a bittersweet chorus that reminds us that good times like this don't last forever.

26 DREAM TEAM

Spearhead, 1994

Michael Franti, the rabble-rousing leader of the hip-hop group Spearhead, mixes up a rollicking potion that's one part basketball and two parts black-liberation philosophy. He points out that while the country was embracing the Olympic Dream Team in '92 there were also riots in L.A. over the beating of Rodney King: "Brothas on the street/And everyone is scared of ya/So how could 10 Africans represent America?" So Franti assembles his own fantasy squad of black heroes. Huey Newton is the shooting guard " 'cause he was extra hard." Marcus Garvey rebounds and outlet passes to Nat Turner, " 'cause he can turn the corner." Angela Davis is posting up, and then there's the ultimate sixth man: "Dr. King/We bring him in in a pinch."

27 MUNICH AIR DISASTER 1958

Morrissey, 2004

Think about the shock it would be in this country if an NFL or MLB team's plane went down midseason. That's what happened to English football when Manchester United's plane crashed during takeoff on an icy runway during a refueling stop after Man U played Red Star Belgrade in the 1958 European Cup. Over half the players were killed, and others were injured too severely to play again. The overwrought emotion Morrissey brings to the song makes a larger point about fandom and the tragedy of athletes dying young.

BONUS TRACK: "News and Tributes," by the Futureheads, a more up-tempo treatment of the same subject.

28 A DYING CUB FAN'S LAST REQUEST

Steve Goodman, 1983

Goodman is most famous for writing the original version of Arlo Guthrie's 1972 hit "City of New Orleans." But the singer-songwriter's wry look at the deathbed wishes of a Wrigley Field bleacher bum is just as powerful. Goodman's fan says: "Have Keith Moreland drop a routine fly. . . /And I'll be ready to die." It's especially poignant, though, knowing that Goodman had leukemia when he wrote the song and died a year later, on Sept. 20, 1984—12 days before the Cubs played in their first playoff game since 1945. Goodman was scheduled to sing the national anthem before Game 1 of the NLCS but had to be replaced by his pal Jimmy Buffett.

BONUS TRACK: "All the Way," by Eddie Vedder, lead vocalist for Pearl Jam (the group was originally called Mookie Blaylock). It's also a love song to the Cubs.

29 SHOOTING HOOPS

G. Love and Special Sauce, 1994

A valentine to pickup ball from the Philadelphia alternative hip-hop band. The music is a slow blues, but the message is upbeat: "Lunch from a hot dog stand, a pretzel and a pop/We've been playing all day 'cause we've had this court nonstop." The group, which pledged its allegiance to the Sixers in "I-76," also gives a shout-out to the run at Philly's Seger Park as the city's best.

30 THE WARRIOR'S CODE

Dropkick Murphys, 2005

"Another murderous right/Another left hook from hell/A bloody war on the Boardwalk/And the kid from Lowell rises to the bell." Before Micky Ward's tale was immortalized by Mark Wahlberg in the 2010 film *The Fighter*, this hyperactive Irish-flavored punk band from Boston paid a knockout tribute to the never-say-die Irish-American boxer.

31 BASKETBALL

Kurtis Blow, 1984

Maybe you prefer the updated 2002 version by Bow Wow, but respect must be paid to the original, by one of rap's pioneers. Blow helped invent the form, becoming the first rapper to sign with a major record label, Mercury. *Basketball* established a link between hip-hop and hoops that has only grown and strengthened since (somehow surviving Allen Iverson's Jewelz phase). And with one of rap's first videos—replete with ballers, ninja fighters, an inexplicable fat guy eating a hot dog next to a giant chicken and endless trash talk—the song reinforced the idea, good or bad, that basketball is not as much about the game as about the player.

BONUS TRACK: "NBA Rap," by Hurt Em' Bad in 1982, played its part too in helping hip-hop cross over.

32 DARRYL DAWKINS' SOUND OF LOVE

Screaming Headless Torsos, 2001

No one combined fun and funky quite like former Sixers center Darryl Dawkins, and this cut from an influential '80s jazz-funk band is a suitable tribute to the first citizen of Lovetron. The Torsos lay out the perfect vibe for Double D with a soulful beat topped with Hendrix-style guitar licks, as vocalist Dean Bowman sonorously sings, "Some still may wonder/Of the glorious power of Chocolate Thunder./A legend at the most/Down low in the post/Guard him and you're toast."

33 CHESAPEAKE

Mike Aiken, 2003

There are hundreds of sailing shanties, and there's Christopher Cross's "Sailing" and Jimmy Buffett's "Take It Back" (the best and perhaps only America's Cup rooting song). But nobody sings about the nautical life better than Aiken. He spends much of the year aboard a 42-foot cutter near Chesapeake, Va., and this simple ode to being on the water explains the appeal.

34 VAN LINGLE MUNGO

Dave Frishberg, 1969

It's little more than Frishberg crooning colorful names of ballplayers from the '40s to jazzy piano lines, but it's wonderfully entertaining. (Where else will you hear Max Lanier rhymed with Johnny Vander Meer?) The one discordant note: The song's mellow lilt hardly fits with the hard-drinking and combative Mungo—who, legend has it, once had to be secreted out of a restaurant in Cuba in a laundry bin to avoid an angry husband with a butcher knife.

35 STEWBALL

Leadbelly, 1940

It might have the richest history of any sports song. The tune was originally an English ballad from the 1700s telling the story of an 11-year-old gelding belonging to Lord Godolphin, who sent the horse to Ireland to race an uppity landowner's champion. "Stewball" made its way to America as a slaves' work song. In Leadbelly's version, the iconic bluesman urges underdog-loving horseplayers, "Bet on Stewball, you might win, win, win." A different version was a hit for Peter, Paul and Mary in 1963.

36 AMERICA'S FAVORITE PASTIME

Todd Snider, 2009

Dock Ellis's 1970 no-hitter on LSD has inspired at least a half dozen songwriters. Barbara Manning and the SF Seals did the trippiest version, in 1993, but Snider, a countryish storyteller from the John Prine school, has the most entertaining. He vividly imagines the day the Pirates' righthander no-hit the Padres after dropping acid ("Taking the mound the ground turned into the icing on a birthday cake. . ."). Said Snider, "As soon as I heard [about that game] I knew I was going to make a song about it."

37 LET THE BIG HORSE RUN

John Stewart, 1975

After Secretariat won the Triple Crown in 1973—with record times that still stand at Churchill Downs and Belmont—the country clamored to see the colt race. But he never ran west of Chicago. Secretariat retired to stud, leading to this plea from Stewart to the horse's owner. Once you get past the clichéd opening, the singer implores, "Please Mrs. Tweedy/I saw him on the TV/Send him out to run in the California sun."

38 DID YOU SEE JACKIE ROBINSON HIT THAT BALL?

Buddy Johnson Orchestra, 1949

Two years after Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball came this assertion of pride in an African-American ballplayer by a black bandleader. It climbed as high as No. 13 on the charts, a measure of the excitement Robinson brought to baseball but also a window into the changing cultural scene in America.

39 THE BALLAD OF EDDIE KLEPP

Chuck Brodsky, 1996

Brodsky specializes in wonderful folk songs about baseball. In this one he keeps alive the memory of the first and probably the only white player to appear in the Negro leagues. Brodsky misspells his hero's name—it's Klep—but he gets the record straight on the born-under-a-bad-sign ballplayer who faced reverse racial discrimination as a pitcher for the Cleveland Buckeyes in 1946.

Bruce Hornsby and the Noisemakers, 2009

Hornsby composed this tune for his score for Spike Lee's 2009 documentary *Kobe Doin' Work*. It revisits the basketball theme that Hornsby—a starting center at James Blair High in Williamsburg, Va., in the early 1970s—mined decades earlier in "Rainbow's Cadillac" and "The Old Playground." Only this time the king of the court is headed for the NBA, because, as the song goes, "We been puttin' our time in while you playin' games."

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