

## Using Best-of Lists

In the movie *High Fidelity*, a record shop owner named Rob (played by John Cusack) expresses his worldview in the form of “Top 5” lists: his five best “side-one track-one” songs of all-time, his five best movies of all time, his five favorite books, etc. When talking about other people, such as former girlfriends on his top five “most memorable split-ups” list, he sizes them up in terms of their “top fives.” Later, he tells the audience, “It’s *what* you like that counts, not what you *are* like.”

Best-of lists condense a number of critical opinions into a brief, easy-to-read format. For many of us, these lists make compelling reading—as they allow us to satisfy our curiosity about the music other people think is best and whether our own favorites make the grade. If we don’t like what we see, we can always make our own list! Also, lists that attempt to summarize the best music of an era are a great way to learn which albums are considered part of the “canon” of popular music—albums we need to know about if we are to consider ourselves knowledgeable about popular music. Remember, though—a list without some explanation as to why items were included is of limited use, simplistic in the same way that “star” album ratings are when not accompanied by reviews that explain the rating.

### Types of Lists

- **Annual Best-of Lists**

At the end of each year, music critics publish their “top picks” in newspapers, magazines, and most every publication or Web site that regularly publishes music reviews. They list the selected albums and usually include brief explanations on why each selection was chosen. Watch for these in your review publication of choice. Some Web sites, such as the Acclaimed Music Web site (<http://www.acclaimedmusic.net>), accumulate links to current best-of lists on the Web.

## Best-of Lists

- **All-Time Greatest Lists**

These lists attempt to make definitive statements about the best music of all-time or, in some cases, the best music from a given era. These are good for stirring up debate. Most often they are published by music magazines, and involve either the editorial judgment of the magazine staff or polls of critics or fans. In addition, some Web sites (such as the Acclaimed Music Web site mentioned above) have created composite “all-time” ratings by combining and weighting the results from multiple lists.

- **Best-of Lists by Genre or Artists**

Amazon.com’s “Essential CDs” lists provide this type of information. To find them, select the “Essential CDs” option on Amazon.com’s music home page. Some magazines also publish genre specific lists.

- **Beginner’s Lists**

Often seen on Classical Music sites. One example is Classical.net’s Basic Repertoire List at: <http://www.classical.net/music/rep/top.html>.

- **Thematic Lists**

These lists are more particular in focus—and may not even be best-of lists. A fun Web site for reading such lists is the Rock Critic’s Top Five Lists site: <http://www.rockcritics.com/topfive>. Here you find lists such as, *Five songs that should be made into feature length movies*, to which you are invited to add your selections and comments. You can also create you own list topic, to which others can add their versions and comments. As this book went to press, this site was in the process of finding a new home (different servers) and the Top Five Lists site was offline. With any luck, they will be back online by the time you read this.

- **Fan-Created Lists**

This is where the fans get their say. A good source of such lists is the Amazon.com Web site, which gives its customers the freedom to engage in “Listmania.” Here, users can create annotated lists of any products being sold on the Web site—including CDs and books. These lists can be based on any theme or selection criteria the list creator wishes. Like fan-written reviews, they vary in quality. The better ones can be useful to the music explorer. To access them, you need to be browsing CDs on the Amazon.com Web site. If there are Listmania lists that include the CD you are looking at, you’ll see links to these lists near the bottom of the page.

## Best-of Radio Programs

If the true test of a best-of list is to be found in the listening, then the ideal best-of list is one that you can listen to. Taking a cue from old-time Top-40 countdown shows, some Internet music services have taken best-of lists and translated them into radio broadcasts—which allow listeners to sample “the best” according to the list in question. Examples include:

- **Rhapsody’s “Best of 2003” station**  
Rhapsody staff’s selections for the best albums of 2003 in various genres. A “Best of 2002” station is also available. For Rhapsody subscribers.
- **Rolling Stone’s Immortals Station (on Rhapsody)**  
“The music of the 50 greatest artists of all time, as selected by a panel of musicians, producers and critics.” For Rhapsody subscribers.
- **Radio VH1’s 100 Greatest Series**  
These collections have been assembled by VH1 staff and “music critics and journalists.” Registration is required to access these stations.
  - 100 Greatest Songs of Rock and Roll  
[http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100\\_greatest\\_rock\\_songs/station.jhtml](http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100_greatest_rock_songs/station.jhtml)
  - 100 Greatest Women of Rock and Roll  
[http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100\\_greatest\\_rock\\_women/station.jhtml](http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100_greatest_rock_women/station.jhtml)
  - 100 Greatest Hard Rock Artists  
[http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100\\_greatest\\_rock\\_artists/station.jhtml](http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100_greatest_rock_artists/station.jhtml)
  - 100 Greatest Dance Songs  
[http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100\\_greatest\\_dance\\_songs/station.jhtml](http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100_greatest_dance_songs/station.jhtml)
  - 100 Greatest Albums of Rock and Roll  
[http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100\\_greatest\\_rock\\_albums/station.jhtml](http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100_greatest_rock_albums/station.jhtml)
  - 100 Greatest Love Songs  
[http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100\\_greatest\\_love\\_songs/station.jhtml](http://www.vh1.com/music/radio/stations/100_greatest_love_songs/station.jhtml)

## Best-of Radio Stations List

With so many Internet radio stations to choose from, “best-of” lists can help steer us to promising stations.

- **Best of Live365** - [http://www.live365.com/community/awards\\_winners.html](http://www.live365.com/community/awards_winners.html)  
Listeners vote for the best Live365 stations in categories by genre and size of station. These “Mikey” awards give listeners another way to pick stations to try from among the thousands that are available on Live365. Awards have been handed out in 45 categories.

## Notable Web Sites with Best-of Information

- **Metacritic** - <http://metacritic.com/music>  
Reviews “from up to 30 national publications” are weighted and combined to produce a “Metascore” for albums. Ranked lists are provided for the years 2000 through 2003 as well as for “all albums reviewed.” A list of review publications used is provided. Metacritic provides similar ranked listings for movies and video games.
- **Acclaimed Music Site** - <http://www.acclaimedmusic.net>  
The product of one Swede’s obsession with best-of lists, this site provides easy access to a huge array of best-of popular music lists from around the world. It is a great source for international best-of lists. Composite “all-time” rankings are also provided, as are listings indexed by album name, artist name, and year. Be prepared to wade through pop-up ads though, as this site is run on a “free” Web hosting service.
- **Pitchfork’s Best New Music** - <http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/best>  
This Web page lists, in reverse chronological order, the best new albums as reviewed on the Pitchfork Web site. Each album listing has a numerical rating, a genre label, a capsule review, and a link to the longer, “full review.”