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Your entry to the Houston music scene **with Sara Cress and Joey Guerra**

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December 29, 2005

The soundtrack to my local life in 2005

There's no easy way to recap my year of music in 2005. Not only did it mark the beginning of this groovy little thing called **HandStamp**, it also, in a bigger sense, expanded my musical horizons more than ever before.

Sounds cheesy, I know, but 2005 was really a year of revelation for me. The Houston scene is brimming with undiscovered, untapped, unappreciated talent. And most of these folks have nothing to do with Mike Jones, Paul Wall or Destiny's Child.

Don't get me wrong. There's definite cause for celebration at those breakout successes, but they hardly paint a whole, accurate picture of Houston's musical medley of talent.

I thought long and hard about the best way to assemble a recap. A top albums list seemed too narrow; a straight-ahead feature seemed a bit dull. So here, I humbly offer a smorgasbord of events, moments and musical memories that rocked my world in 2005. I hope you'll find something among the melodies that rings true for you.

- **Sister, sister**

[Miss Leslie & Her Juke-Jointers](#) -- who else? -- provided the perfect entry-point for my ongoing affair with Houston's honky-tonk scene. The group continues to refine its classic sound with live dates in and around Texas. It's all expertly captured on Miss Leslie's outstanding debut disc, [Honky-Tonk Revival](#). I expect big things from this outfit in the coming year.

Leslie's sister, [Hilary Sloan](#), is one of the city's most fascinating, frustrating artists. Her high-lonesome, honky-tonk blend has earned big praise from critics and contemporaries.

Sloan took a break earlier this year and re-emerged in August to record *Hard Luck Town*, a concept album spanning vintage bluegrass, progressive country and acoustic peace songs. The live recording was one of the year's most stunning evenings of music. The disc was supposed to be released this year, but Sloan has disappeared once again, has stopped playing live dates and is said to be re-re-tooling her sound. Her website is also down. And the world -- at least mine -- is a little bit sadder.

- **Y'all come!**

Face This World, the 2005 album from acoustic-based performer [Glenna Bell](#), haunted my disc player for weeks on end. It's a fragile, funny and heartbreaking collection of songs, highlighted by *Moving On* and *Tumbling Down*, a pair of duets with [John Evans](#).

But what also stuck in my mind was *Cosmos Cafe*, a jangly jingle about the popular [Heights restaurant and live-music venue](#), that was used in radio spots and in TV commercials. (Bell married Cosmos owner Pete Pallas in May 2004.) It's anchored by the catchphrase, "Y'all come!" which Bell still uses in all her emails. Too cute.

- **Leave it to divas**

Houston's hip-hop scene broke out in a big way this year, but locally-bred female singers also strutted their stuff for national audiences.

R&B princess [Brooke Valentine](#) scored big with her crunk-flavored single *Girlfight*, which became an MTV staple. Her full-length disc, *Chain Letter*, offered a surprisingly diverse and confident blend of styles. Valentine attended Grissom and Hobby Elementary schools, Paul Revere and Jane Long Middle schools and Hastings High School.

Houston-native [Natalie](#) melted hearts with her wistful first single, *Goin' Crazy*, which racked up serious airplay all over the country. She also landed a cosmetics deal and toured with Frankie J. The diminutive singer spent seven years as a Houston Rockets Power Dancer and earned a degree in criminal justice from San Jacinto College.

[Jenna Drey](#) scored a Billboard Top 10 Club Play hit with her slinky single *Killin' Me*, and follow-up track *Why Should I Believe You* is equally enthralling. Drey was born in Los Angeles, but she moved to Houston when she was in the fourth grade, later attending St. Thomas Episcopal High School.

- **Why so serious?**

On the surface, bilingual rock outfit [Chango Jackson](#) and neo-new-wavers the [Black Math Experiment](#) don't seem to have much in common. Beyond obvious differences, however, the pair shines bright as two of Houston's most innovative live acts. Both use silly costumes, theatrics and large doses of humor to not only support, but anchor, their music. Chango turns Spanish-rock stereotypes on their heads. BME mashes up sounds and styles into a delicious dork-rock stew, showcased to maximum effect on its recently released debut disc, *Fake Words & Signs From Space*.

- **Sweet musical relief**

The Katrina CD, released last month, was a beautiful example of the power of local music. The project was conceived by [Christian Andreason](#) and includes songs from [Cameron Dezen](#), [Glenna Bell](#) with [John Evans](#), [Jez](#), [Kim Carson](#), [Eileen Faxas](#), [Alan Lett](#) and San Marcos' own [Terri Hendrix](#).

There are also pop treats from former Houstonians [Kitten K. Sera](#) and [Jenna Drey](#).

You can purchase *The Katrina CD* at [Cactus Music & Video](#) or at the [official website](#). All proceeds will be distributed among various charities.

- **Second time's the charm**

[Mando Saenz](#)'s excellent *Watertown* disc barely saw the light of day when it was first issued in 2002 on Houston's now-defunct Plethorazine label. Thankfully, the immensely talented singer-songwriter signed a publishing and distribution deal this year with Carnival Recording Company. The Nashville outfit re-released *Watertown* in January with a full-force national push that earned Saenz video airplay and cross-country respect. He is currently working on a new disc.

- **Coming into her own**

Songbird [Bonnie Bishop](#) morphed from a country-music cutie on her debut album, *Long Way Home*, into a full-throttle rock-and-blues force on her 2005 disc, *Soft to the Touch*. The Houston-bred, Austin-based performer purrs, growls and wails her way through tracks that defy categorization, and she does it all with a colorful, charismatic dose of newfound confidence. With the right push, it's not hard to imagine Bishop making waves well beyond Texas barrooms and performance halls.

- **A double dose of dirty pop -- and rock**

Local bands [Vibe Committee](#) and [skyblue72](#) landed a one-two pop punch with the recent release of their sonically separate -- but equally appealing -- [debut discs](#). Both discs stand as two of the strongest, slickest local releases in recent memory.

Vibe Committee has always been a diverse, adventurous group, but *Flavor* showcases a mature, evolved sound. Skyblue72 self-titled effort offers a nice balance of standard pop-rock riffs and more adventurous rhythms, anchored by the wailing vocals of Jessica Zwebach.

Posted by [Joey Guerra](#) at December 29, 2005 05:49 PM

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Comments

We've both put two of the same CDs on our lists...Miss Leslie and Bonnie (obviously I'm kinda cornered into picking country CDs because I work at KILT). Amazing how so many women are making such fantastic CDS these days...I think we will see a bigger market for them in the next few years.

Posted by: [Leslie T](#) at December 29, 2005 08:05 PM

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