

Mariah Carey — *Charmbracet* (MonarC/Island)

*Charmbracet* should be all the things that Carey did so well, and so seemingly effortlessly, for nearly a decade: soaring ballads, soulful pop ditties, and the rap-lite that got all the suburban folks groovin'. *Charmbracet* has a sampling of all of those qualities, but there are no signature songs. There's no "Fantasy" here. Her "One Sweet Day" has come and gone. That said, *Charmbracet* is a vast improvement over the ill-fated *Glitter* soundtrack, with nary a trace of overwrought vocals or boring updates of funk classics. Rather, Carey keeps it slow and steady, focusing on her five-octave voice. She coos, cries and practically calls out, "Look everyone, I'm calm again!" Unfortunately, calm means boring. Her one-time catchy beats have been replaced by languid tempos and stark instrumentation. Only on the gospel-influenced "Saving Grace" and the orchestral Def Leppard cover (?) "Bringin' on the Heartbreak" does Carey sound remotely inspired. Though "Sunflowers for Alfred Roy," is a genuinely touching meditation on her father's final days, there are no bold tracks here to hook you in for repeat spins.

Whitney Houston — *Just Whitney* (Arista)

Her first efforts in four years since the success of her album, *My Love Is Your Love*, there is little to talk about on Whitney Houston's latest endeavor, *Just Whitney*. Just under 40 minutes, with 10 R&B tempo songs, this album could very well amount to her worst hits. With the style of an amateur and a tone that has been hardened a bit through misuse, those in the know can't help but wonder what former producer Clive Davis would think of this output. A glimmer of hope appears with songs like "Try It On My Own" and Houston's take on Debby Boone's 1977 hit "You Light Up My Life." But don't expect this remake to soar into the hearts of fans as did her previous remake of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You." In the end, the bulk of the album isn't just Whitney — it's just bland. (B.B.)

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