Doe is a rare guy whose solo LPs and gigs I look forward to as much as the triumphant concerts with his reunited X. When experiencing either, you succumb to his personality. Like most original '70s punks, this tall, wiry man has heart; but more than that untamed broodiness, he betrays an active intelligence, personable friendliness, unwavering social consciousness, and roots musical history grasp. With producer David Way and more groovey guests (Dave Alvin, Aimee Mann, Dan Auerbach, etc.), he makes records steeped in that, unadulterated, with all b.s. jettisoned. Plus, the tenor of his tenor is as resolute as when 1980's Los Angeles hit, only cut open with age's wisdom, a Year isn't the dark LP his bio or the title suggests, but rather a convincing, more consistent affair than 2005's excellent but scattershot, oddly sequenced Forever Hasn't Happened Yet, and its best half-dozen songs mirror the folk-pop of his 2002 masterpiece Dim Stars Bright Sky. Don't miss two more classic male/female duets, one with golden-throated Kathleen Edwards, the catchy "The Golden State," the other with Jill Sobule, the twinkling pop "Darling Underdog" (written with his ex, X's Exene Cervenka). The folk/country touch of "A Little More Time" with Edwards and "The Meanest Man in the World" shiver quiet, and the stunning closer (get there), "Grain of Salt," melts you like Ralph Stanley. Schizophrenically, the remainder parades his thicker, harder rockers like 2000's Freedom Is..., such as the shimmering "Unforgiven." But the dichotomy works, reflecting a seat-of-the-pants LP studio-assembled with talent, spit, and raw inspiration. Anyway, Doe, anytime. (yeproc.com)

17 the la's
BBC in session
(UNIVERSAL U.K.)

Those old enough to remember our interview with reclusive singer/songwriter Lee Mavers in issue 30 16 years ago might recall how much he hated his band's classic, only album, 1990's Steve Lillywhite-produced The La's. Over and over, Mavers spilt bile about the record in the press. It was forced out against his wishes by Go! Discs, after three previous expensive sessions with three other top shelf producers, John Porter (Smiths), John Leckie (Stone Roses), and Mike Hedges (Banshees, Cure), had similarly been summarily rejected by the unremittingly dissatisfied, pot-smoking frontman. Mavers wanted to record more primitively and directly, four-tracks, in his footstomping Liverpool practice space, but was not accommodated. (In retrospect, he predicted and predated the lo-fi non-studio recording movement by several years!) And though the BBC's studios are hardly a woodshed, their Radio Sessions 'record and mix four songs in one day' dictates did obviously closer approximate Mavers' desires. So why this collection wasn't released before is a mystery! The same The La's songs (with two b-sides) sound remarkably refreshed and distinctly different. These are earlier, more skiffle-influenced renditions, with a tighter, preceding rhythm section, while Mavers' hot, thick voice (one of the best going then) is a major high. I wouldn't say any BBC version is vastly superior, as The La's remains incredible—whatever Mavers said. But several like "I Can't Sleep" are pretty wild. and "There She Goes" is more electric. Overall, the guitars are upfront and scratchy, while the vocals are mixed down into them, so you feel like you're in the room. Now it only rumors of a second LP following the band's 2005 rerelease (Mavers, bassist John Powers, and two new guys) prove true! Could they ever top this gold?

18 Colin Blunstone
One year
(WATER)

At last, this classic 1972 orchestral-pop LP is released on CD in the U.S. Of course, fans likely had the 2000 import CD, if not the original domestic vinyl. And still there is not a bonus track in sight (damn!), so there isn't much to talk about except for Alec Palao's liner notes interviewing the band's three principals—that is, unless you don't have this baroque pop masterpiece, universally acknowledged as the only Blunstone solo LP you really must have. (The followup thereafter was marked.) It's the one post-Zombies album that stands up in comparison to their incredible box set. One might even consider this a creditable third Zombies LP, since three-fifths of the disband (in 1968) group are involved (keyboardist Rod Argent and guitarist Chris White produce and collaborate), two songs had previously been Zombified, and the creative arrangements follow from their undeniable work of genius, 1968's Odessey and Oracle and its worldwide smash, "Time of the Season." But because it's not the Zombies, what's missing is their cherished harmonies. ("Smoky Day" has one.) But it does have Blunstone's singular, breathy voice, still at its peak of expressive power on the sensational pop single "Caroline Goodbye" (about an actual ex named Caroline!) and divergent whimsy on the Denny Laine-written British 1972 #15 "Say You Don't Mind." And unlike Odessey, its linchpin is a string quartet that flitters around Blunstone's exquisite vocals throughout, from the drodwerp-gorgeous "Her Song" to the radical rearrangement of Tim Hardin's immortal "Misty Roses" (perhaps only Blunstone could equal the late Hardin's eerie ache), tripled in length to accommodate the strings' stark journey. A fantastic piece of work that will never grow old, much like, apparently, its vocalist, if you've seen him on stage this decade. (rundistribution.com)