

only one favorite in common in 2011

2. "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy" — Somewhere, Obi-Wan, er, Alec Guinness is smiling down on Jedi protege Gary Oldman. OK, so Oldman never apprenticed with Guinness, who did what seemed the definitive version of John le Carre's spymaster George Smiley in two miniseries 30 years ago. But Oldman makes the role completely his own, inhabiting Smiley's stillness and impenetrability, somehow conveying the man's subsurface passion while barely twitching a muscle. Director Tomas Alfredson and his phenomenal cast tell a fiercely cerebral, meticulously paced spell-binder, masterfully compacted from le Carre's sprawling novel.

3. "Hugo" — If we must have 3-D talking pictures, they all should be held to this standard. This is the only film I've told friends must be seen in 3-D. Martin Scorsese makes the third dimension not just eye-catching but essential to the experience. Scorsese's 3-D en-folds viewers in 1930s Paris, letting fans walk right alongside his two child heroes as they restore a bitter old man's faith and sense of wonder. And what a trip back to the moon it is to see Scorsese's affectionate re-creations of

film pioneer Georges Melies' silent fantasies.

4. "Le Havre" — Finnish director Aki Kaurismaki's simple tale of a French shoeshine guy and an immigrant youth is sly and stealthy. Sweet yet unsentimental, understated yet rich in spirit, the film is populated by old souls who are a joy to watch, led by Andre Wilms as the shoeshiner who steps into the guardian angel role for an African boy who is in France illegally. The film hints that good deeds are a reward in themselves — but karma just might toss a little magic your way for doing the right thing.

5. "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo" — Rooney Mara. Wow. It seemed a thankless task to follow Noomi Rapace, the electrifying lone-wolf in the Swedish-language adaptation of Stieg Larsson's best-seller. But Mara goes deeper and darker with a controlled detonation of a performance in David Fincher's Hollywood version. As a disgraced journalist who teams with Larsson's avenging angel, Daniel Craig is an anchor of cool rationality around which Mara revolves like a demon. Fincher — one of the least sentimental directors around — and Larsson's harsh emotional terrain are an

ideal match of filmmaker and material.

6. "50/50" — Who says cancer can't be entertaining? Inspired by his own medical battle, screenwriter Will Reiser tells an authentic tale where laughter, lust, selfishness and duplicity don't go away just because of a little tumor. Every cancer patient should have a lewd, crude friend like the one Joseph Gordon-Levitt has here in Seth Rogen. Director Jonathan Levine juggles a jangle of emotions and keeps them all in the air, while the cast — including Anna Kendrick, Anjelica Huston and Bryce Dallas Howard — makes every moment genuine.

7. "Submarine" — Richard Ayoade's directing debut is dead on in the emotions — from blissful obsession to abrupt indifference — that accompany first love and teen desire. Craig Roberts as a big-eyed Welsh romantic and Yasmin Paige as a rebellious firebug are the unlikeliest but most adorable couple in all of Wales. Their tender story is sweetly shadowed by that of Roberts' dowdy parents (Sally Hawkins and Noah Taylor), seemingly a pair of dead fish who just might have a little spawning left in them.

8. "The Help" — You get a Big Hollywood Social Message — and you leave the theater with that feel-good spring in your step. First-time director Tate Taylor does a slick, smart job adapting childhood pal Kathryn Stockett's best-seller about black maids in 1960s Mississippi spilling the beans on their white

employers. And where to begin with the performances? Viola Davis, Emma Stone, Octavia Spencer, Jessica Chastain, Bryce Dallas Howard — we can go on and on. Working-class help or idle gentry, every woman in the film is polished to brilliance.

9. "Troll Hunter" — This deliriously weird mock documentary is a wild ride through remote and alien landscapes of Norway, where huge, hideous trolls — yes, trolls — are on a bloody rampage. Director Andre Ovredal adds his own mad spin to the found-footage horror story a la "The Blair Witch Project" and "Cloverfield." Purportedly shot by filmmakers who disappeared while chronicling the exploits of a professional troll hunter, the film is a fresh, visceral take on the monster movie, loaded with impressive special effects and warped, wicked humor.

10. "The Muppets" — Somewhere back in the 1980s, there were two shows a college girlfriend and I never missed: "SCTV" and "The Muppet Show." Director James Bobin, Jason Segel and Amy Adams team for a gentle, loving rebirth for Kermit and pals, filled with those schmaltzy, toe-tapping Muppet tunes and giddily corny gags. The movie is an elaborate production, but it feels guileless and timeless. Don't know what became of the college girlfriend. But it's nice having the Muppets back in our lives. Mah na mah na.

Pop music's top happenings

By Mesfin Fekadu

Associated Press

Sure, everyone has their list of top albums. But how do you rank the things that really resonated in pop music this year — like Nicki Minaj's ubiquity or the top "Glee" cover? We try to put a spotlight on some of music's other highlights here.

BEST HOOK: The chorus of Rihanna's "S&M" is downright nasty, so we can't repeat it here, but it's downright catchy, too. Na, na, na, na, c'mon!

BEST GUILTY PLEASURE SONG: "Tonight, Tonight" AND "I Like It Like That" by Hot Chelle Rae.

BEST USE OF NICKI MINAJ: Last year, Nicki Minaj costarred on many songs, but this year she focused more on her solo efforts. Her best guest appearance is on David Guetta's "Turn Me On," a future hit that highlights the

rapper's singing chops.

BEST UNRELEASED TRACK: Frank Ocean's "Thinking About You" did not appear on his free album and it was never supposed to be a single. He recorded a demo of the song for singer Bridget Kelly, but his version is personal and perfect, with its Maxwell-esque falsetto breakdown.

BEST INANE LYRIC: Insert LMFAO song here.

BEST MUSIC VIDEO: Swedish singer Lykke Li is hauntingly amazing in her video for "I Follow Rivers," filmed on a snowy, deserted island. It's cinematic, dramatic and classic, and by far the best music video of 2011.

BEST "GLEE" COVER: The songs covered on "Glee" are often current hits on the music charts, and that can get annoying. So it was refreshing to hear K.D. Lang's "Constant Craving," and there should be more like it.

Happy New Year!

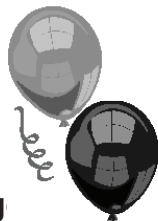
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