

The Greatest Web Site of All Time

Well, maybe not, but Piero Scaruffi has become an Internet destination with his eclectic best-of lists.

By DAN MORRELL

MUSIC magazine editors have few more tried-and-true formulas for boosting newsstand sales and Web traffic than best-of lists. Rolling Stone's 500 Greatest Albums of All Time; Spin magazine's 100 Greatest Albums 1985-2005; Pitchforkmedia.com's Top 100 album lists for the 1970's, 80's and 90's: vast digests of gathered knowledge and opinion, usually the work of teams of editors, journalists and musicians, painstakingly assembled.

But their collaborative efforts pale in comparison to the solo work of Piero Scaruffi.

In addition to his annual album rankings and all-time rankings (Captain Beefheart's "Trout Mask Replica" currently ranks No. 1), Mr. Scaruffi's multilingual Web site (www.scaruffi.com) has a list of the best rock bands and individual artists — best guitarist, best keyboardist, best male and female vocalist — of each year since 1955. A ranking of the 164 best jazz albums of all time, complete with 903 honorable mentions. A list of the 39 best "short" songs released from 1955 to 1979. The 119 best psychedelic albums of all time. The best all-time guitarists, drummers and keyboardists.

For a one-man operation, the amount of material is staggering. And Mr. Scaruffi, 51, a freelance software consultant and occasional university lecturer living in Redwood City, Calif., also runs thymos.com, which contains his equally prolific writings on topics of consciousness and cognition. Not surprisingly, he says running the two sites has become a full-time job. "I barely have time to breathe," he said in a telephone interview.

Before the hobby became the job, Mr. Scaruffi, who has a degree in mathematics from the University in Turin, had worked in artificial intelligence and computers.

That's now a fallback when he needs the money. "If I need to buy a new car, then I have to go out and do software consulting," he said in a

light Italian accent.

His work dominates both his life and his living room. He recently transferred his many piles of books (a "vertical sorting method") to 11 bookcases with six shelves apiece. Vinyl is kept in the garage, he said, and CD's — unless they are part of the "essential" pile near his desk — are housed in giant boxes around the house. The CD's can sometimes go unheard for several years before Mr. Scaruffi gets around to reviewing them, making his end-of-the-year lists a perpetual-motion machine.

Last month his site had 646,640 hits, according to a tabulator available on his site. The web traffic analyzer Alexa.com ranks scaruffi.com at around 59,000, below such established independent music blogs as Largehearted Boy

(blog.largeheartedboy.com) but ahead of heavily linked favorites like You Ain't No Picasso (youaintnopicasso.com).

Mr. Scaruffi's music site is colorful but stark, consisting mainly of simple text with basic color backdrops, with limited advertising. The ads help cover the \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month he spends on CD's (adding to a collection of an estimated 20,000). The site's simplicity harkens back to Mr. Scaruffi's text-only electronic fanzine, first published for a group of 20 in 1985, back when e-mail was closer to Arpanet than to AOL.

His initial foray into electronic punditry was a function of his technological acumen and his prowess as a musical savant while growing up in Trivero, Italy. "When I was in high school in the

early 1970's I was the 'expert' on music," said Mr. Scaruffi, who moved to California in 1983. For his senior project he turned in a 50-page paper on the history of rock music. His classmates' papers, he said, totaled two or three pages.

"People were constantly asking for my advice: 'Tell me what five albums I should buy now,' or 'Tell me what are the five best heavy metal albums of all time,'" Mr. Scaruffi said. "Eventually you get tired of answering the same question, and you prepare a list. Then the list becomes many lists."

He collected a good amount of his catalog of rankings and essays from the site in "A History of Rock Music, 1951-2000," which was published in 2003 and has sold about 1,500 copies by his estimate. That same year he also published "Thinking About Thought: A Primer on the New Science of Mind, Towards a Unified Understanding of Mind, Life and Matter," which deals mainly with consciousness and artificial intelligence. His studies in those latter subjects have included terms as a visiting scholar at Stanford and Harvard and lecturing posts at, among other places, the University of California, Berkeley, where last year he taught The Nature of Mind (an introduction to cognitive science) and A History of Knowledge.

But visiting his site and reading his arguments against the Beatles' legacy ("Ray Davies of the Kinks was certainly a far better songwriter than Lennon & McCartney") or his list of "Most significant works of music 1950-1990" (equal parts Karlheinz Stockhausen and Cecil Taylor), readers could expect Mr. Scaruffi to be dedicated solely to developing a complete music compendium, a sort of musical Wikipedia without all the extra help. Not so, he said.

"Probably my biggest ambition would be to write a history of knowledge," he said. "Something that packages all of my interests together: literature, science, philosophy, politics — whatever." Music, he said, is just one part of a much larger puzzle.



Peter Dasilva for The New York Times