

Paste

The 20 Best Country & Americana Albums of 2019

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20. Son Volt: *Union*

Jay Farrar's penchant for standing firm and holding his ground was well established in the aftermath of the deepening divide between him and [Jeff Tweedy](#), a decision that ultimately led to the demise of Uncle Tupelo, the formative outfit they helmed in common. It's not unusual then to find Farrar still maintaining a demonstrative stance, given the determination that powers *Union*, the ninth album in [Son Volt's](#) sometimes unsteady trajectory. Indeed, Farrar appears more intent than ever to get his points across. Billed as a reaction to the travails and turmoil brought on by today's political climate, *Union* makes no attempt to deny the irony of its title. With his ragged vocals front and center, Farrar and his band's latest line-up purvey a somber sound that's occasionally mournful yet still assured and certain. The sentiments are

unmistakable; "99 percent, it's a trickle down world... stuck in cement," Farrar declares on the sullen and sobering "The 99." Eight of its songs were recorded at places associated with two individuals that Farrar particularly reveres: community organizer Mary Harris (otherwise known as "Mother Jones") and the immortal godfather of protest [Woody Guthrie](#). Three were recorded at the Mother Jones Museum in Mount Olive, Illinois, and four others at the Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa, Okla. Indeed, the final offerings on the album, "The Symbol," was apparently inspired by Guthrie's own anthem, "Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)," a song that resonates more than ever now. With the majority of the songs maintaining a steady stride, Farrar shares his conviction with authority and insistence. Those are the qualities that allow *Union* to remain true to its common core. —*Lee Zimmerman*