


Alternative CDs dominate 2006's best


Top 10 albums of '06

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Each year around this time, magazines that cover entertainment news publish lists of the best performances of the preceding year. *West Word* is no exception; the *Around Town* section of the paper regularly publishes reviews of films, television programs, video games, restaurants and other media, including music. This year's top 10 albums include:

10.  *45:33* – LCD Soundsystem

A treadmill run, “programming inclines and speed throughout,” is what LCD Soundsystem frontman James Murphy describes is the basis for *45:33*, a sprawling and, as the title suggests, 45 minute and 33 second long epic. With no really central melody throughout, and the lyrics appearing in short bursts every 10 minutes or so, *45:33* is a perfect paradigm for 2006's unconventional tendencies. It was originally designed, so Murphy says, to require very little focus and for the beat not to rival the pace of running. Regardless, it is also easy to see the appeal even while sitting on a sofa or car seat.

9.  *Shut Up I Am Dreaming* – Sunset Rubdown

Beginning modestly, with the lo-fi debut *Snake's Got A Leg*, Sunset Rubdown was Spencer Krug, a five-dollar Casio and a four-track recorder. Krug had full creative control over—well—himself, as a solo artist, and this fact remains unchanged as Sunset Rubdown adopted three new members for their sophomore album. Krug, having performed vocally with other groups (Frog Eyes, Destroyer and Wolf Parade), brings more to the table than just his voice. As much as Krug's expertly dramatic crooning makes every band he plays in unique, it is not the only factor to consider. *Shut Up I Am Dreaming's* success lies more in what is absent from the recordings, rather than what has been added.


In Wolf Parade, Krug's voice is constantly at war with co-singer Dan Boeckner. Though a diplomatic war, with much given to and taken by and from each singer, their roles are far from collaborative. As Sunset Rubdown's only singer, Krug's songwriting skills are more easily seen than ever and never contested, as he delivers an album lyrically superior to the equally outstanding *Snake's Got A Leg*. Taking the best parts from Sunset Rubdown's previous effort, and leaving out all bad influences, but keeping the Casio, *Shut Up I Am Dreaming* rivals any other work done by Krug.

8.  *Bitter Tea* – The Fiery Furnaces

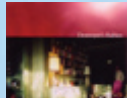
In *Bitter Tea*, the Friedbergers have outdone themselves in weirdness. Yeah, this is the most accessible album the brother-sister duo has ever released, but the fact that they contained themselves to one melody throughout each song or kept most within the radio-acceptable four-minute mark apparently had no effect on the direction they took the album. From the title track, which sounds like it's either caught in some kind of laser war or Japanese video game, to “Benton Harbor Blues,” in which the bright synthesizer brings to mind a sunny beach, it is easy to see how the album could be misinterpreted as unfocused. For those who think that: just listen to the lyrics.

7.  *Noise Floor: Rarities 1998-2005* – Bright Eyes

Though there is much to be said of lead singer, songwriter and guitarist Conor Oberst's songwriting talent, that talent is much better exemplified on complete albums, rather than a compilation like *Noise Floor*. With no common symbolism between songs or apparent theme, besides all the songs being hard to come by, Oberst's talent seems to be wasted on furthering the individual songs, rather than the album as a whole. The individual songs on this album are great, though. Early Oberst, as far as I can tell, is a better Oberst: still exploring his sound, rather than settling into a comfortable place, where regardless of the quality of his releases, he still makes money.

6.  *Ys* – Joanna Newsom

Perhaps the most daring album of the year, *Ys* has surely redefined a genre—whatever genre that may be. There is no melody in any of the five songs on the album that Newsom plays with for more than a verse or two before abandoning it for one better, accompanied by an entire orchestra reduced to just one harp or flute at times. The entire album almost functions as an intricately, excruciatingly, precisely arranged jam session, with Newsom leaving no vocal stone unturned.

5.  *Destroyer's Rubies* – Destroyer

The best way to describe *Destroyer's Rubies* is by describing “Rubies,” its first track, which begins with heavily distorted guitar and Daniel Bejar's almost mocking voice, and, as if it was absolutely common to do so, folds into pulsing acoustic strumming. If anything can be said about *Destroyer's Rubies*, it's the quality of the arrangements. Bejar has created a seamless interchangeability between the piano and plugged or unplugged guitars that show up in almost every song. *Rubies'* shadowy acoustic rock uses each of these instruments piled on top of each other to create its sound, but it's hard to notice when one disappears or another appears.

4.  *Everything All The Time* – Band of Horses

Pitchfork Media's Amanda Petrusich described listening to *Everything All The Time* “like steering your 1987 Corolla through 100 miles of white-hot desert, blindly navigating.” The murky atmosphere the album creates is comforting at times, but at times it feels like flying above the clouds when a hole opens up below you and you plunge toward Earth. The sad arpeggiated melodies and soaring vocals characterize *Everything All The Time*, which has no rivals in the sad-rock field. The symbolism of a “billion day funeral” is just too depressing.

3.  *The Loon* – Tapes 'n Tapes

On *The Loon* is some of the only honest-to-god rock 'n roll of 2006. There is very little evidence of any mixing, synthesized melodies, noise tracks or any of the tricks that 2006 has become a host and, occasionally, a victim to. *The Loon* is pure and is rewarded for it, with melodies that couldn't be recreated in any other medium than a guitar and amplifier. On “Insistor,” Josh Grier's angsty vocals couple with the most danceable drum beat of the year and a country melody that sounds more like the transpiring of a western bank robbery and subsequent chase. In a pool of bands as large as 2006 has provided, the fact that a bands as pure and blues oriented as Tapes 'n Tapes has survived, let alone conquered, speaks volumes for the future of the genre.

2.  *The Crane Wife* – The Decemberists

Whenever a band decides to make the move from a small, respectable indie label to a mainstream label giant such as, say, Capitol Records, I cringe. In 2004, when Death Cab for Cutie signed a “long-time worldwide deal” with Atlantic Records, leaving behind old friend Barsuk Records, I cringed, and Death Cab's subsequent record *Plans*, released in 2005, gave me only more reason to cringe. So in 2005, when The Decemberists seemed to be taking a page out of Death Cab's book, announcing their move from Kill Rock Stars to Capitol Records, I could only assume the worst. A later press release indicated that they started the recording of their first album under Capitol, called *The Crane Wife*, featuring Death Cab producer and guitarist Chris Walla, which only seemed like it could make the situation worse for them. What band would take advice from another band that failed in the same situation? The Decemberists, that's who; and they knew what they were doing.

In the translation to their new label, nothing was lost. The Decemberists continue to explore, and subsequently conquer, new territory: Meloy's singing ranging from uncharacteristically warm and comforting to his old-hat intense urgency and the guitar from quiet funky guitar strums to piercing electric to finger-picked acoustic.

While The Decemberists' move to a major record label is disappointing, their music continues not to be. With the counsel of Walla, they seem to have avoided the disasters that usually accompany a label change. Though *The Crane Wife* is a tough contender for The Decemberists' best work to date, and not an obvious winner, the fact that it is able to compete with The Decemberists' past work is warrant enough for its title as the number two album of the year.

1.  *Return to the Sea* – Islands

Though the exact details of the unicorn's existence often have been a source of argument between experts on the subject, in all accounts of the mythical beast, unicorns are believed to be untamable, uncatchable and immortal. In 2003, though, The Unicorns vanished from the music scene as quickly as they conquered, it, after their release of the innovative, and sometimes silly, *Who Will Cut Our Hair When We're Gone?*.

If mythology can teach us anything, though, it is that unicorns are indeed immortal, and so are bands of the same name. Barring hip-hop side project Th'Corn Gangg, The Unicorns' revival recently came under the name of Islands, created by ex-Unicorns Nick Diamonds and J'aime Tambeur. Though The Unicorns appear to be an immediate influence in *Return to the Sea*, the best of the album remains the progression made from *Who Will Cut Our Hair*. Blending styles like calypso, traditional country and tango, Islands are all over the map, although they seem to prefer the isle theme.

This all-inclusive style is really makes *Return to the Sea* so exceptionally brilliant. In “Humans,” drummer Tambeur opens with bouncing bass drum alongside a marching beat, and a snare roll following suit, as if Islands were going into battle, while Diamonds describes the demise of an entire civilization. Somehow, the somber march still makes me want to dance.

Like the other nine discs on this list, *Return to the Sea* embraces the philosophy that characterize 2006's releases: originality.

Although 2006 wasn't a year of break-out albums in a particular genre, it was a year in which artists dared enough to express themselves with no regard to traditional sound. *Return to the Sea* makes the steel drum pop, while *The Crane Wife* does the same with folklore. Joanna Newsom redefines what is vocally, lyrically and melodically possible, and LCD Soundsystem cites treadmill running as the number-one influence of *45:33*. Considering the past year's shattering of previous musical boundaries, 2006's releases, one hopes, hint at the potential of this year's products.