

By John Staton
Currents Editor

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The Raconteurs: Broken Boy Soldiers (XL) Jack White, sharing songwriting duties with Brendan Benson, scores again with his first album away from the White Stripes. Whether rocked-out and groovy (Level) or laid-back and lovely (Together), Broken Boy Soldiers is near-perfect.

Shooter Jennings: Electric Rodeo (Universal South) Waylon's son comes into his own with this mix of classic country and Southern rock. Songs two through five – Gone to Carolina, Some Rowdy Women, The Song is Still Slipping Away and Hair of the Dog – may be the best album sequence of the year.

The Fiery Furnaces: Bitter Tea (Fat Possum) OK, it's weird – really weird, like it came from some other universe, with its sometimes-backward vocals and layers upon layers of sounds and effects. But I defy you to find prettier songs than Waiting to Know You or the untitled (see, I told you it was weird) 15th track.

Be Your Own Pet: Be Your Own Pet (Ecstatic Peace!) Youthful, exuberant and relentlessly rockin', this teenage Nashville band recalls old-school skate-punk while still managing to reference Zeppelin (October, First Account), deliver pop hooks (Adventure) and sound thoroughly modern.

Bob Dylan: Modern Times (Columbia) If you don't love Dylan (hello, Grammy voters), shut yo' mouf and get outside; the old guy's still got it. And if you listen to the song Spirit on the Water and still think Dylan can't sing, God help ya.

The Black Angels: Passover (Light in the Attic) Like Jim Morrison singing for the Velvet Underground, it's slightly pretentious but rocks and rolls with visceral intensity anyway. A mesmerizing mix of hardcore blues, art-house trance-rock and anti-war statements.

Dexter Romweber: Piano (Redeye) Who knew? North Carolina rockabilly legend goes neo-classical, with piano compositions influenced by the likes of Chopin and Liszt. Even if you hate classical, you'll be entranced by the pure passion and fury this album verily pulses with.

The Black Keys: Magic Potion (Nonesuch) Thick, sick guitar blues with sledgehammer lyrics. Some critics complained that their sound hasn't changed since 2003's Thickfreakness, but if it ain't broke, why fix it?

Lamont Skylark: High Wire (self-release) This local four-piece turns in the best local album of the year just under the 2007 wire. Lincoln Morris' catchy, country-rock-flavored laments (Troubadour Blues, Fallin' Apart) are High Wire's backbone, but the album's best song might be drummer/singer/multi-instrumentalist Kevin Rhodes' heartbreakingly beautiful anthem Angel. Catch the CD release show Dec. 15 at Bella Festa.

Da Howlies: Ohana (No Ka Oi) These local Hawaiian-music faves had a lot of wave-swept fun on this short album. There are retooled classics (Bill Ladd's steel guitar work shines on Hawaiian War Chant, while percussionist/singer Paul Currier kills it on I'm Pau) as well as originals that singer/ukulele man Zach Hanner infuses with great wordplay (Okole Hau) and storytelling (Ghost of Malibu). Aloha!

XHENET ALIU Currents contributor (albums in no particular order)

Tapes 'n Tapes: The Loon (Ibid) The Pavement and Modest Mouse influences are clearly there, but unlike some critics, I don't find their sound derivative or cloying. In fact, it was kind of nice to be excited by straight indie rock as if I were still 20.

Heartless Bastards: All This Time (Fat Possum) I don't love the whole album, but I love parts of it enough for it to clear my Top 10. It sounds as if lead singer and primary songwriter Erika Wennerstrom practiced her craft by belting out Heart songs on a loading dock in between cigarettes and burnt coffee.

Arbouretum: Rites of Uncovering (Thrill Jockey) This is cheating a bit, since Thrill Jockey won't officially release the album until January, but I've been listening to and loving an advance copy for months. Psychedelic in a dark way, like when the hippies realized the peace movement failed but kept dropping acid anyway.

Cat Power: The Greatest (Matador) Not the greatest of her albums or the year, but there are the ubiquitous Chan Marshall sweet spots that make you forget about the mediocre moments. Anyway, she'll always be a sentimental favorite.

The Go-Betweens: That Striped Sunlight Sound (Yep Rock) Maybe another slight cheat, as it's a new compilation of old material, but their old material still sounds good in 2006. Karen should be the pop classic that gets played on jukeboxes in bars right after, say, Psycho Killer.

Califone: Roots and Crowns (Thrill Jockey) This is the kind of album I might put on as background music and then realize it's snuck into the foreground, completely distracting me from the task at hand. I've heard it labeled as an Americana album, although if it is, it's not dusty byways-Americana. More like cramped studio apartments in middle-of-winter Chicago Americana.

Karen Dalton: In My Own Time (Light in the Attic/IODA) A posthumous re-release from a vocalist who came dangerously close to fading into obscurity. She resented the Billie Holiday comparisons, but I can't help but think of Holiday when I hear Dalton – she's not an imitator but a kindred soul.

Tom Waits: Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers and Bastards (Anti-) If you like Tom Waits, then this needs no explanation. If you don't, then this won't win you over.

Neko Case: Fox Confessor Brings the Flood (Anti-) Her vocals in the past have seemed a touch too trained, as if she might've once had the lead in a high school play. I've always admired her distinctness as an artist, but I wished I could have pulled her aside and suggest she sometimes take it from 11 back down to 10. Somebody must've made the suggestion for me. On this release, there's more of an equilibrium between the vocals and the music, and it makes for a more harmonious listening experience.

Band of Horses: Everything All the Time (Sub Pop) What can I say, I'm a sucker for reverb and singers who like Neil Young as much as I do.

Gravity Records Staff picks (in no particular order)

TV On The Radio: Return To Cookie Mountain (Interscope) You probably have some indie-snob friend who blogged about how this is the best album of the year, but said friend might be right. Any band that can get David Bowie to sing back-up vocals on its second full-length release may actually be worth the hype. A classic!

Joanna Newsom: Ys (Drag City) As beautifully weird and heart-wrenching as music is going to get in 2006. When you have Steve Albini and Jim O'Rourke working on your album you KNOW you are doing something timeless. With

beautiful harp plucking and the never-intrusive string arrangements of Van Dyke Parks (Beach Boys collaborator), 'Ys' may take the better part of next year for the world to completely absorb.

I Love You But I've Chosen Darkness: Fear Is On Our Side (Secretly Canadian) Morose and bleak like Joy Division but with hints of a pop sensibility similar to that of Interpol, I've Chosen Darkness has created an epic indie rock masterpiece. An ethereal gem.

Annuals: Be He Me (Ace Fu) This North Carolina five-piece fluctuates from stripped, sincere muddles of minimalism to grandiose, orchestral pop flourishes with remarkable ease and dexterity. An unexpected cohesion of tension and transition.

Ghostface Killah: Fishscale (Def Jam) Produced by the likes of J. Dilla, Pete Rock and MF Doom, this cinematic fifth album has confirmed Ghostface, one of hip-hop's elder statesmen, as King of New York. With all the terrible club rap flooding the market this year, this album was a breath of fresh air that people overlooked. It's like Ghost says, "My arts is crafty darts, why y'all stuck with Laffy Taffy?"

The Clipse: Hell Hath No Fury (Re-Up/Jive) Pusha T and Malice are two of the meanest, unrelenting rappers out there, and tales of life in the crack game, backed by the best Neptunes production in years, make for an insane, uncompromising album. With their quick wit and vicious flow, it's no wonder why these guys are a favorite of hipsters and hustlers alike.

Swan Lake: Beast Moans (Jagjaguwar) Comprised of Dan Bejar (Destroyer, New Pornographers), Spencer Krug (Frog Eyes) and Carey Mercer (Wolf Parade), Swan Lake is just as quirky and intelligent as its members' full-time groups. Mercer and Bejar's voices sound incredibly contrasting yet perfectly complementary.

Band of Horses: Everything All the Time (Sub Pop) Singer Ben Bridwell and company bare their collective heart and put forth an epic, sullen-yet-hopeful collection of songs that's easier to get lost in than a certain maze in a certain movie (the one with David Bowie decked out in Spandex).

Beirut: The Gulag Orkestar (Ba Da Bing!) A rich plethora of mandolins, ukulele, organ, piano, drum and glockenspiel that make Condon, and his amazingly mature voice, sound more like a 50-year-old Russian folk musician than a 19-year-old hipster.

Grizzly Bear: Yellow House (Warp) No longer just the lo-fi solo project of Edward Droste, the mighty Grizzly Bear is now a full outfit filled with keyboard, woodwinds, electronics, drums and guitar. Filled with lo-fi atmospherics, drifting melodies and weathered vocals, and a serious contender for album of the year.

Shawna Kenney Currents contributor

The Evens: Get Evens (Dischord Records) Solid, simple offerings from the godfather of harDCore, just in time – my copy of their debut CD suffers from a severe case of 'overplay.'

Tim Barry: Rivanna Junction Suburba (Home Records) Avail singer Tim Barry's solo acoustic efforts finally get a proper recording. Songs about bruised hearts and hopping trains that are too rough around the edges for folk and too soft to be punk rock. Just perfectly perfect.

Sonic Youth: Rather Ripped (Geffen Records) Somehow I'd missed Sonic Youth's genius all of these years. I should be kicked out of punk rock for that – but I've repented and seen the error of my ways.

Anti-Flag: For Blood and Empire (RCA Records) Unabashed political punk with insanely catchy anthems and all kinds of yummy bonus material in the packaging. Press play and repeat often.

Sick of It All: Death to Tyrants (Abacus Recordings) NYHC will never die – as long as Sick of It All's still playing. These guys will tour and record till the wheels fall off or vocalist Lou Kohler's voice gives out, neither of which seems likely.

Lady Sovereign: Public Warning! (Def Jam) Snotty cockney rap from a pint-sized girl calling herself “the biggest midget in the game,” plus she covers the Sex Pistols’ *Pretty Vacant*. What’s not to love? Half the time we don’t know what she’s saying, ‘but we don’t caaaaare!’

Bouncing Souls: The Gold Album (Chunksaah Records) One wonders whether a band that’s been around as long as these guys can continue to pull it off year after year, and year after year the answer is a resounding ‘yes!’

Bad Brains: Live at CBGB 1982: The Audio Recordings (MVD Audio) What could be better than hearing the most influential (and underrated) punk band of all time sing *Banned in DC* from the stage of the seminal New York club that is no more? (RIP, CBGBs). It’s the next best thing to being there ...

John Doe: Thing ‘For the Best of Us (Yep Rock Records) This is a re-issue of a ’98 EP with added bonus songs, including ‘This Loving Thing’ (co-written by Dave Grohl) and a Woody Guthrie cover. The ex ‘X’ singer/bassist/cowboy poet can croon in my ear anytime.

Beastie Boys: Awesome. I Shot That! (DVD, Velocity/ThinkFilm) Fifty lucky Beasties fans were given Hi-8 cameras to shoot their 2004 show in Madison Square Garden. Seamless editing and crisp audio pull the clever concept together, making this doc crucial viewing. (Cameos by Doug E. Fresh, Jack Black, David Cross and Ben Stiller are the, ‘cheese on the macaroni,’ if you will.)

KENNETH PRICE Currents contributor

J Dilla: Donuts (Stones Throw) Producer extraordinaire J Dilla’s swan song is full of soulful, layered beats that serve as constant reminders of how much he will be missed by hip-hop music.

The Clipse: Hell Hath No Fury (Re-Up/Jive) The Clipse, with a little help from the sonically devastating Neptunes, create a rap classic consisting of nothing but brilliant cocaine rap over sparse, yet crushing beats.

Murs and 9th Wonder: Murray’s Revenge (Def Jux) Murs returns to Morrisville to reunite with super producer 9th Wonder. The result is an album full of flawless beats and dope rhymes.

Ghostface Killah: Fishscale (Def Jam) Ghostface branches out to a wide array of producers (MF DOOM, Pete Rock, Jay Dilla, RZA) on his fifth solo LP and grows as an artist as a result.

Lupe Fiasco: Food & Liquor (Atlantic) Refreshing, conscious hip-hop. Lupe emerges as an intelligent wordsmith with a very bright future.

Beck: ‘The Information’ (Interscope) Can Beck make a bad album?

Darien Brockington: Somebody To Love (ABB) The debut album from N.C.’s soulful crooner fills the void D’Angelo’s absence has left in soul music.

Justin Timberlake: FutureSex/LoveSounds (Jive) Stop it. Stop hating!

Herbert: Scale (K7 Records) An eclectic mix of disco, techno, glam, hip-hop and house music that is constantly interesting and entertaining. Listening to the album creates an emotional rollercoaster varying from sorrow to complete exhilaration.

Gnarls Barkley: St. Elsewhere (Downtown) Danger Mouse and Cee Lo unite to construct a bizarre hip-hop album and end up with a pop masterpiece.

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