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MadeLoud Presents: 2008 in Review

by [Adam Schragin](#)

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What a year, right everyone? A new president, new technologies, and even a new Depression. And on the music front - just like every year - we were inundated with breakout albums, comebacks from old favorites, and sleeper hits. After wading through the next big things and all their accompanying hype, and carefully tabulating the collective pros and cons of every record released this year, the lab results are in, and here, in each of our writer's words, are our top ten albums of 2008.

Michael Keefe:

10. James: *Hey Ma*

James sound reinvigorated on their first album in seven years. *Hey Ma* features the same line-up that created the band's seminal 1993 album, *Laid*. Returning trumpeter Andy Diagram adds an extra blast to the group's surging, U2-like anthems, while Tim Booth's vocals soar high.

9. Lykke Li: *Youth Novels*

Lykke Li is a new electro-pop singer-songwriter from Sweden whose debut album, *Youth Novels*, runs the gamut from whispered spoken word pieces to bouncy tech-pop singles that combine Björk's oddness with the infectiousness of fellow Swede, Annie. Lykke Li makes it all work.

8. David Byrne & Brian Eno: *Everything That Happens Will Happen Today*

Two of the godfathers of alternative pop have joined forces again, recording an album together for the first time since 1981's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. Instead of making another album of clattery, paranoid afro-pop and found sound radio broadcasts, Brian Eno crafted a great collection of instrumental tracks and had David Byrne provide lyrics and vocals. *Everything That Happens Will Happen Today* is full of buoyant pop/rock songs for adults. These tracks are major-keyed and singable, but with just enough melancholy and angst to sink your teeth into.

7. Martha Wainwright: *I Know You're Married But I've Got Feelings Too*

The daughter of '70s folk singers Loudon Wainwright III and Kate McGarrigle, and Rufus Wainwright's little sister, Martha Wainwright steps into her own with her sophomore album. She's a daring singer, wrapping her voice around odd meters, and stretching and bending words around her music. Her music is often dramatic, but Wainwright's lyrics are quite wry, creating the perfect balance across this impressive and compelling album.

6. Sparks: *Exotic Creatures of the Deep*

Led by brothers Ron (keyboards) and Russell (vocals) Mael, Sparks have been around since the early '70s, making strange and catchy art-pop. Though they faded away in the late '80s, Sparks are enjoying a rebirth here in the 21st century. 2002's critically praised *Lil' Beethoven* combined the sounds of Philip Glass, Queen, and Pet Shop Boys to wonderful effect. This year's nearly as good *Exotic Creatures of the Deep* maintains that formula, while introducing new lyrical topics such as monkey-chauffeured driving trips and male pregnancy. Insanely good!

5. Brian Wilson: *That Lucky Old Sun*

That Lucky Old Sun is Brian Wilson's best starting-from-scratch batch of songwriting since he abandoned *SMiLE* over 40 years ago. It would seem that reviving those songs for *SMiLE*'s much-belated 2004 completion renewed Wilson's dormant compositional abilities of old. *That Lucky Old Sun* is his ode to mid-20th century Southern California, and it's the perfect blend of *Sunflower*-era Beach Boys rock and Brian's more elegant pop songwriting circa 1965's *Today!*.

4. R.E.M.: *Accelerate*

After drummer Bill Berry left the band, R.E.M. lost their rock 'n' roll energy and sank deeper and deeper into crafting lite-weight studio albums. *Accelerate* is – by far – R.E.M.'s best album of the 2000s and quite possibly their strongest since 1992's *Automatic for the People*. Combining the jangly, up-tempo college rock of their mid-'80s peak with the guitar grit of their grunge-inspired sound of a decade later, the reinvigorated band have written a bunch of catchy tunes and played them with the kind of enthusiasm reminiscent of their heyday.

3. Marillion: *Happiness Is the Road*

British art rock band Marillion's second double-disc set of the 2000s, *Happiness Is the Road*, comes close to rivaling its 2-CD predecessor, the mighty *Marbles*. Disc one of *Happiness*, "Essence," boasts a wide open sound, great dynamics, beautiful transitions, and meticulously arrangements. Steve Hogarth's lyrics chronicle his struggle to maintain a spiritual connection in the modern world. Disc two, "The Hard Shoulder," is the fun rock record that you get to gobble down for dessert. The songs are punchy and catchy, yet also adhere to the sonic expansiveness that has always been Marillion's template for artistic success.

2. Duffy: *Rockferry*

New Welsh singer Duffy teamed up with former Suede guitarist Bernard Butler to concoct the surprisingly strong set of old school R&B found on *Rockferry*. Rather than the funk and grit of Sharon Jones or even Amy Winehouse, Duffy leans toward the poppier era of early Dusty Springfield, combined with the smoothness of Al Green. *Rockferry* reveals its strengths slowly over time, winning your devotion one great song at a time.

1. Vampire Weekend: *Vampire Weekend*

Like their sonic brethren The Strokes, Vampire Weekend are essentially a bunch of privileged college kids from New York City. Fortunately, they spent their time in the dorm rooms well, writing the most infectious indie pop album of 2008. The band's self-titled debut is laced with the rhythms and highlife guitar playing of Afropop. Yes, Paul Simon already pulled off this trick on *Graceland*, but instead of a capella Zulu singing, Vampire Weekend opt for a string quartet, giving their indie rock an occasionally elegant chamber pop vibe. Mostly, though, *Vampire Weekend* relies on the simple charms of sunny hooks, quirky lyrics, and a beat you can dance to.

Adam Schragin:

10. Gameboy/Gamegirl – *The Golden Ghetto Sex EP*

The remixes aren't that exciting, but the five tracks that comprise the meat of this EP by Australian quartet are hot enough to turn heads and warrant repeat listens. Ironic and facetious to a fault, when the day-glo melts away, we're left with stellar production work from Miami Horror, fun vocal interplay and one of the best dance mixes of the year.

9. Chris Schlarb – *Twilight and Ghost Stories*

Crammed with backstory, this first release by Schlarb under his own name saw release on the Asthmatic Kitty label this year after undergoing work for five years and utilizing the talents of forty musicians. The piece drifts from mood to mood, remaining entrancing even as it bends from softer sounds to those more dissonant.

8. White Denim – *Exposion*

One of the most invigorating live bands in recent memory, White Denim would have to severely drop the ball to keep this album off of year-end lists. With such energy and excellent songs, the challenging trio simply had to go into the studio and do what they already do best. The end result has been a couple of years in the making, but well worth it.

7. Viking Moses/Golden Ghost – *Split EP*

Talk about sleepers - this tour-only EP fused some of freak-folk auteur Viking Moses' best songs with

the throaty Golden Ghost for one of the most enjoyable listens of the year, particularly the uplifting but still grounded "Baptism Dress."

6. Benko – *Welcome to the Follow Through*

Like White Denim, Benko are a minimalist Austin trio, but the similarities stop there. This band specializes in cerebral pop constructed just from bass, drums, and xylophone. Benko make the most of bareness, using silence and restraint as the background for invigorating hooks and strong songwriting.

5. Pillow Queens – *Kookoolegit*

It's always a joy to find garage rock that doesn't cramp up on one particular style or retread the same ideas ad nauseam. *Kookoolegit* is refreshing on that point, but what the fuzzy textures peel off to reveal are the talents of two strong songwriters who would operate masterfully in any genre.

4. Girl Talk – *Feed the Animals*

Often imitated, derided, and/or paid extravagant sums of money to play private parties to the unfairly wealthy, Greg Gillis and his mash-up moniker *Girl Talk* had another hell of a year in 2008 thanks, in large part, to the release *Feed the Animals*. Conventional wisdom may have warned that Gillis already had his day in the sun, but the new album comfortably hit those sweet spots of musical metamorphosis and interplay that made him a force to be reckoned with in the first place.

3. of Montreal – *Skeletal Lamping*

The depression & sex opus *Hissing Fauna, Are You the Destroyer* at his back, the voice of of Montreal had few restrictions going forward, now that an audience, financial capital and respect were safely his. Rumors pulsed out that Barnes was working on some sort of sports concept record, so it was quite relieving that instead he had found the smoothest collection of weird and full-tilt pop since the occasionally messy *Coquelicot Asleep in the Poppies: A Variety of Whimsical Verse*.

2. Sigur Ros - *Með suð í eyrum við spilum endalaust*

Often utterly beautiful even while painfully depressing, Sigur Ros enlisted the talents of producer Flood for what might be their most uplifting effort yet. Playing in the studio more than just using it to give songs their shine, the songs here bubble up with marching band flourishes, percussive exercises and complete choir breakdowns. For a band that's always moving forward, this direction suits them well. Just don't expect them to stick to it.

1. Shearwater – *Rook*

Shearwater evidenced some growing pains with their 2006 release *Palo Santo*, a violent and edgy collection of songs (the first without founding member Will Sheff) that stood in bare contrast to earlier, more subtle efforts. With *Rook* the group coalesces over both rocky and rugged bombast ("Century Eyes") and sweet, breathable bliss ("The Hunter's Star"). Good luck finding an album this year with more subtlety, breadth of vision and harmonic grace.

Andrew Reilly:

10. Guns N' Roses - *Chinese Democracy*

Yes, it's only a GN'R album in name. Yes, it was allegedly completed seven years ago. Yes, it's really weird and at times downright awful. But only when you trim away the fat does one of the most interesting rock records in years truly come out of hiding - not to mention the awesome-to-a-fault solos

from Buckethead.

9. Duffy - *Rockferry*

She gets unfairly compared to Amy Winehouse, which is a shame; no one ever faulted Martha and the Vandellas for the existence of the Supremes, so what can Aimee Duffy really do? Not much except release a gloriously compact album of impeccable Motown throwbacks and heartfelt soul, all perfectly built on the foundation of ex-Suede axeman Bernard Butler's brilliant arrangements.

8. Miranda Lee Richards - *Early November EP*

Psychedelic country folk probably won't set the world on fire any time soon, but if it did Richards would probably be the one holding the blowtorch. In the space of four songs, Richards creates an astonishingly wide-open musical realm of golden roads and mountain suns, all haunted by echoing slide pedal steel and her delicate, reverb-soaked vocals.

7. Jenny Lewis - *Acid Tongue*

Another fine outing by the Rilo Kiley frontwoman probably moves that band closer to its logical end, but the Americana focus of Lewis' second solo record at least provides comfort "Stefani-glam" isn't her new direction.

6. Counting Crows - *Saturday Nights and Sunday Mornings*

Counting Crows have always walked the line between happy and sad, mopey and cheery, drunk and hung over; with this quasi-double-album, they finally acknowledged and embraced themselves as musicians and made the first record that sounds only like a Counting Crows record.

5. My Morning Jacket - *Evil Urges*

My esteemed colleague Ira Brooker [said it best](#): "The band pushes that formula even deeper on *Evil Urges*, leading to a maddeningly uneven album that veers haphazardly from rapturous highs to thudding lows." The might of the highs, however, more than cancel out the lows, and MMJ have created another great soundtrack for long drives, camping, and beard-growing.

4. Dido - *Safe Trip Home*

Eschewing nearly all of the techno and dance elements that defined her first two albums, Dido's collaboration with Jon Brion reveals her as a songwriter manifested into electronic music, rather than an electronic artist forced to write songs. By turns aching, anthemic, uplifting and just plain goofy, this is her strongest set of songs yet.

3. The Magnetic Fields - *Distortion*

Noisy. Bemoaning. Boozy. Sarcastic. Gleefully miserable. Perfect pop.

2. Opeth - *Watershed*

Are Opeth past metal? Yes. No. Not really. Who cares? The solos are crazier, the quiet moments are quieter, the lyrics are even gloomier, the riffs are heavier, and the vocals reach further into the pits of hell. This is not the best Opeth album, but this still an Opeth album which in pretty much any year puts it atop the metal heap.

1. Portishead - *Third*

Even for Portishead, this is a very strange project. Beth Gibbons wails while Geoff Barrow twiddles and Adrian Utley meanders further and further away from his jazz roots. The group may have better individual songs in its back catalogue, but *Third* gels in a way neither of the group's previous two outings ever did.

Ira Brooker:

10. Crooked Fingers – *Forfeit/Fortune*

Eric Bachmann's latest reaffirms his status as one of the most consistently interesting creative forces on the indie scene. This time around, his gracefully gritty songwriting is buoyed by eclectic production that draws on everything from power pop to European folk to '80s goth rock.

9. Tobacco – *Fucked Up Friends*

The Black Moth Super Rainbow co-founder follows in that band's unpredictable footsteps with this raucous blend of hip-hop, electronica and psychedelia. It's the type of album that will set heads nodding at the right kind of party and clear the room at the wrong kind.

8. The Ting Tings – *We Started Nothing*

The British duo's debut album was ubiquitous on 2008's pop culture landscape, turning up on MTV, an iPod ad and soundtracks from "Slumdog Millionaire" to "The House Bunny." It's easy to see why – their brand of glam-pop is brassy, sassy and catchy as hell.

7. Cat Power – *Jukebox*

She's one of her generation's greatest lyricists, but Chan Marshall's second covers collection proves she can knock it out of the park no matter who's holding the pen. Her rendition of Bob Dylan's "I Believe in You" hits especially hard, while the album's lone original, "Song for Bobby," captures Dylan's voice almost as well as the man himself.

6. She & Him – *Volume One*

At first glance, the pairing of indie film gamine Zooey Deschanel and indie folk charmer M. Ward looked like a pretentious gimmick, but the duo's debut is exactly the opposite. Deschanel's charming delivery complements Ward's clever production perfectly on this sunny collection of tunes that would fit right in on a '70s pop sampler.

5. TV on the Radio – *Dear Science*

It's not quite on par with the band's 2006 masterpiece *Return to Cookie Mountain*, but that's about the only knock to be made against this slicker, sleeker follow-up. Plenty of bands would kill to be able to evoke half the passion that bleeds from every TV on the Radio song.

4. Q-Tip – *The Renaissance*

The Tribe Called Quest front man's sophomore solo effort was a long time coming, but well worth the wait. In a year that saw disappointing efforts from hip-hop cult favorites from Del to Devin, Q-Tip's distinctive flow, groovy beats and quick-witted lyricism rang out loud and strong.

3. Ruby Suns – *Sea Lion*

A lot of albums strive to be compared to Pet Sounds, but this elaborately produced kaleidoscope of

sound is one of the very few that actually earns that distinction. Veering from ponderous to poppy to straight-up silly, the New Zealanders' second album draws on a huge range of global influences and reveals a little more with every listening.

2. Yahowa 13 – *Sonic Portation*

It may not have been the year's most talked-about reunion, but the return of this '70s psych-rock trio was by far the most fruitful. Over an album's worth of improvised jams, Yahowa 13 crafts a powerful, apocalyptic soundscape that transcends the decades and flat-out kicks ass.

1. Amadou & Mariam – *Welcome to Mali*

The latest effort by Mali's premiere husband-and-wife duo isn't as instantly catchy as its Manu Chao-produced predecessor, but this mind-blowing amalgam of Afro-funk, folk and even electronica is even more ambitious. There simply aren't many more exciting acts anywhere on the globe.

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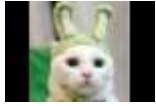
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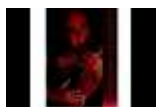
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