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## BEST OF 2008: Music

By Joel Oliphint, Rick Allen and John Petric  
 Published: Tuesday, December 30, 2008 4:26 PM EST

Last year's top CDs

Joel Oliphint's picks:

1. [Bon Iver](#), *For Emma, Forever Ago*

I knew after my first couple of listens to this debut album that it would be a tough one to unseat from the top spot. Justin Vernon retreated to the woods of Wisconsin to escape from life, chop wood, hunt deer and layer his haunting, soulful falsetto over wintry melodies. It's a masterpiece. Believe the hype.

2. [Frightened Rabbit](#), *The Midnight Organ Fight*

Anthemic Scottish rock with warbling, pleading choruses so catchy that you'll be humming them immediately, but with lyrics so uncomfortably raw and revealing that you'll feel like you shouldn't. Example: "I'm drunk, and you're probably on pills/If we both have the same diseases, it's irrelevant girl." Later in the song, singer Scott Hutchison sheepishly admits, "You won't find love in a hole." But you may find it in his thick brogue.

3. [Shearwater](#), *Rook*

I'm not sure why Okkervil River defector Jonathan Meiburg perennially gets the shaft in end-of-the-year lists. *Rook* is beautiful and meticulously composed, a testament to my belief that the album as an art form won't—or at least shouldn't—be replaced by singles and EPs. Listen with headphones. (Meiburg's pristine and lovely vocals also carry "Lost Coastlines," the strongest track on Okkervil's River's first-rate '08 release, *The Stand Ins*.)

4. [TV on the Radio](#), *Dear Science*

I was in the vast minority of critics who never completely warmed up to *Return to Cookie Mountain*, other than the standout track "Wolf Like Me." But the more I listened to *Dear Science*, the more it proved irresistible. It's arty, it's gloomy, but it's as danceable as disco. "This is beginning to feel like the dawn of the loser forever," goes "DLZ," and you'll want to shake your rump in response.

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#### 5. [Blitzen Trapper](#), *Furr*

As I write this, I'm wondering whether I'll have list regret over putting Furr ahead of Deerhunter's *Microcastle*. It's hard to know whether Blitzen Trapper's big leap forward into the land of Dylan-inspired rock will hold up better than Bradford Cox's startlingly polished effort. But that's part of the fun of list-making, right? For now, Blitzen Trapper gets the edge because of the band's killer Skully's set in November.

#### BEST LOCAL ALBUMS

##### 1. [Miranda Sound](#), *Miranda Sound*

##### 2. [Times New Viking](#), *Rip It Off*

##### 3. [Melty Melty](#), *Rise of the Birdmen*

##### 4. [Two Cow Garage](#), *Speaking in Cursive*

##### 5. [Envelope](#), *Shark Bolt!*

Rick Allen's picks:

##### 1. [The Apes](#), *Ghost Games*

With no shortage of art-school noise fetishism or New Weird Americana on the market, it's remarkable that the Apes have carved such a healthy niche for themselves. The quartet has mastered a simple form of avant-naïf, acid-damaged, grungy rock that appeals to a lot of folks for a lot of reasons. Their latest features the debut of new vocalist Breck Brunson, whose spectral, Robert Plant-like wailing has patched up what was previously the band's only weak spot.

##### 2. [Crooked Fingers](#), *Forfeit/Fortune*

Eric Bachmann has tended to emphasize the "solo" in his solo project, Crooked Fingers, frequently recording and touring alone. The result is a catalog of stripped-down, highly introspective 21st century folk music that frequently mirrors what the listener assumes to be Bachmann's loneliness. *Forfeit/Fortune* isn't going to pass for a party record, but it does allow Bachmann to open up Crooked Fingers to collaborators, even forgoing lead vocals on occasion. The sound is warm and loose, and proves that there is more to Crooked Fingers' world than Bachmann previously was willing to show.

##### 3. [Jucifer](#), *L'Autrichienne*

This one would have made the cut based solely on the creative chances Jucifer took in crafting the album. That it came out so perfectly is just icing on the cake. The duo stepped well beyond the confines of the metal underground, creating a thematic work that dabbles in everything from moody pop to grindcore, representing a quantum leap in the band's songwriting chops and execution and establishing Jucifer as a band that merits much more of our attention in the future.

##### 4. [Sic Alps](#), *U.S. EZ*

The messy, lo-fi duo is nearly a stereotype in underground rock these days, yet Sic Alps have found a new way to bleed that turnip, opening up a world of hissy, low-rent psychedelia that sounds both ancient and new at the same time. The sloppiness of the performances and nearly outsider-folk songwriting hint that Sic Alps are tapping into the collective unconscious, channeling the voices of Jandek and Roky Erickson as frequently as Lou Barlow and Thurston Moore, and melding it all into a cohesive, catchy whole.

#### 5. [Times New Viking](#), *Rip It Off*

It's easy to think of this one as a gimme—a blatant example of rooting for the home team—but the fact is that Times New Viking is one of the few bands that have earned all of the accolades heaped upon them. The band's short sets of noisy, 90-second pop songs reveal a whole universe of influences, from Ptolemaic Terrascope psychedelic to cutesy New Zealand indie pop to the punchy rock Ohio is best known for. There are many similar bands out there, but none have managed to channel the livewire that is youth with such depth and talent.

THE WORST:

#### [Beyoncé](#), *I Am...Sasha Fierce*

Every now and then, celebrities attain a level of hubris that makes it impossible for them to recognize the level of silliness they've exposed to the public. This past year's prime example has been Beyoncé's *I Am...Sasha Fierce*, an album devoted to a claw-wearing alter ego who supposedly takes over onstage. Someone needs to sit Beyoncé down and explain to her that the "crazy artist" shtick works only if you're a real artist. Because of his talent, Prince can pull off craziness. Because her stardom is based on being pretty and letting the studio guys fix her mediocre vocals, Beyoncé can't. And the worst part is that, despite its weirdness, the album is still boring.

John Petric's choices:

#### 1. [Ween](#), *At the Cat's Cradle*, 1992

The majesty, the splendor, the sheer genius—well, one out of three ain't bad. Dean and Gene Ween are positively Einsteinian in their DIY ethos here, as these two idiot savants employ merely themselves, a drum machine and a treasure trove of brilliant and near-brilliant songs that eventually became the early Ween canon. "Cover It With Gas and Set It on Fire" and "The Goin' Gets Tough From the Getgo" in the live setting achieve more as rough gems than most bands' finest studio work. Plus, the bonus DVD was partly shot at Stache's.

#### 2. [Various artists](#): *The Wire...and all the pieces matter*

This collection of five years' worth of music from HBO's drugs-and-murder drama set in Baltimore turned out to be one of the most consistently satisfying plays of the year for me. While one can disagree with creator David Simon's sociological assessment of the drug problem, the grittiness of the tale is perfectly reflected in the genre-hopping selections here.

#### 3. [Bob Dylan](#), *Tell Tale Signs*

Taken as a whole, Bob's studio albums suck. But *Signs* brilliantly mines his output from 1989 to 2006 and comes up with 27 previously unreleased tracks, studio demos, alternate takes and various live things to make it the single most rewarding Dylan release since Jehovah knows when. Love ya, Bob. Feel free to retire at any time (you, too, B.B. King).

#### 4. [Black Keys](#), *Attack and Release*

This pairing with sly and clever studio producer Danger Mouse revealed that the Akron/Canton duo have plenty of substance in and among their paganesque blues-garage stomps. The album doesn't just lay in the pocket of Danger Mouse groove but has a lingering afterlife similar only to the Mama Fernandez's Italian sausage and lasagna.

#### 5. [Metallica](#), *Death Magnetic*

Yes, yes, I know, these old farts are so stale they stink like mummy meat. But did you really listen to this? Some of the riffs are the best metal in years, and the endless codas of raging primeval instrumentalization are staggeringly phenomenal.

THE WORST:

[Jack's Mannequin](#), *The Glass Passenger*

Get this stank-on-ya at your own risk: *The Glass Passenger* is the single most unlistenable album of the year. Jack's frontman Andrew McMahon sounds like Conor Oberst with a sex change, and despite being a newly made man, he's more comfortable as a hysterical pianist. We'll never win the war on terror with wimps like Jack's in the rear with the gear.

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**Seriously** wrote on Jan 2, 2009 10:00 AM:

" Did someone really just go on record DEFENDING ... of all people... Beyonce?

That is hilarious.

I guess the concept of "taste" is seriously lacking here in C-bus.

It takes all kinds, i suppose. "

**Ha** wrote on Dec 30, 2008 11:50 PM:

" "Because her stardom is based on being pretty and letting the studio guys fix her mediocre vocals, Beyoncé can't."

This alone shows how gobsmackingly ignorant you must be. It's fine that you don't like her music or her album, but to say this with a straight face is to assume your audience is as ill-informed as you. Beyoncé is one of the few artists today that actually sings live at every performance, and she's had quite a few live performances since she debuted with Destiny's Child. Her serious critics may fault her for many things, but vocal prowess is not one of them. Her live Superbowl performance of the National Anthem, for example, shows power, control, grace, and range - all without the help of studio mixing. Next time you make a best/worst list, level some legitimate criticisms and people might take you seriously as a legitimate critic. "

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