

# Top 20 Albums of 2008

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By Todd Eric Lovato

I was 8 years old when a well-intentioned but preoccupied aunt, in an eleventh-hour scramble to fulfill her Secret Santa obligation to me, wrapped a pair of beat-up cassette tapes in gift paper and masking tape.

As my cousins and siblings reveled in the likes of new Atari games, Swiss Army knives and movie theater gift certificates, I found myself slowly peeling away the wrapping paper to reveal my veritable lumps of coal: Supertramp's 1974 *Crime of the Century* and the ensuing *Breakfast in America*. I think I cried. But in due time, I actually listened to the albums and subsequently fell in love with them — well, *Breakfast in America*, anyway.

Two decades later, the Swiss Army knives are long gone, the gift certificates expired and the video games are outmoded. But curiously, those two cassettes — once the bane of a childhood Christmas circa 1987 — now occupy a special place in my music collection and woe to the man in my presence who tries to switch the radio dial to tune out "Goodbye Stranger," "Logical Song" or "Take the Long Way Home."

When it comes to giving the very flexible gift of music, a little exploration (the fun part), a bit of empathy (e.g. grandmothers and Swedish experimental death metal bands will almost never jive) and some good fortune (see the aforementioned Supertramp anecdote), often new or unheard music makes a wonderful gift that has the power to make a monumentally lasting impression on a loved one. Like all fine art, good music evokes memories and emotions and helps frame new perspectives for its listeners. That's a pretty potent gift.

While the music of popular one-word entities like Britney, Beyonce and Kanye, will likely end up ranking as this year's most popular stocking-stuffers, 2008 has been an exceptional year for new artists making music outside of the spectrum of commercial radio. If you are the type of person that asks Santa for music that's a little bit out of your comfort zone, here's to hoping your inner gift-giving circle is well aware of it. And even if a beat-up Supertramp cassette ends up in your stocking, trust me, there are worse things in life. But if it contains even one of the following 20 recordings, count yourself as one of the lucky ones.

## 20) Recapturing the Banjo

Otis Taylor

File under: African-Roots Modern Banjo Blues

I've heard the argument go like this: Black guys created blues, rock and jazz, then the white guys swooped in and stole it. On *Recapturing the Banjo*, bluesman Otis Taylor, along with an all-star cast of bluesmen that includes Alvin Youngblood Hart, Guy Davis, Corey Harris and Keb' Mo', makes the same argument for the banjo, an instrument that has origins in Africa. Never one to shy from controversy, Taylor explores modern blues and African and folk roots with penetrating insight and an anthropological devotion towards reclaiming his often misunderstood instrument of choice.

19) What Does It All Mean? 1983-2006 Retrospective

Steinski

File under: Eccentric Godfather of Turntablism, Anthologized

Hip hop producer Steinski (along with Double Dee) rose to underground hip hop stardom with a series of early-'80s sample-based musical collages called the Lessons. Over the decades, the Steinski myth grew through bootlegs and eventually inspired countless hip hop artists including DJ Shadow, Coldcut and Cut Chemist. At one time extremely rare and barely legal, the music on this two-disc compilation is proof that Steinski remains one of the unsung progenitors of turntablism and sample-based music. Get it while it's still legal.

18) Modern Guilt

Beck

File under: Junk Pop-Culture Psychedelic Postmodern Rock

The pairing of Beck and super producer Danger Mouse had many fans salivating at the possibility of an *Odelay II*. We were mistaken. *Modern Guilt* is a psychologically dark and brooding album, one that delves deep into neo-psychedelia and singer/songwriter postmodern paranoia, while somehow remaining fun. This is Beck all grown up and finally churning out music where his strengths lie.

17) Off Track Betting

Nels Andrews

File under: Wandering Alt.Country/Folk Troubadour

Hailing from New Mexico and currently residing in Brooklyn, singer/songwriter Nels Andrews is earning international recognition with *Off Track Betting*, his sophomore album that boasts the talents of Ani DiFranco, bassist and producer Todd Sickafoose and Wilco keyboardist Michael Jorgensen. Beneath its earthy, minimalist songwriting, the album employs waves of ambient soundscapes, resulting in Andrews's strongest work to date and a recording that commands repeated listens.

## 16) Hercules and Love Affair

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File under: Left-Field Soundtrack to the Gay Soirée

For the group Hercules and Love Affair, disco isn't just a genre, it's a piece of clay, a medium to be molded and manipulated in new and creative ways. But in addition to the excellent dance music on this self-titled album are the top-notch vocal performances of Nomi, Kim Ann Foxman and the spellbinding, sexually-ambiguous vocal stylings of Antony Hegarty. House-cum-disco never sounded so current.

## 15) Made in the Dark

Hot Chip

File under: Electronic Dance Pop for the Wallflower

Hot Chip and its unique brand of electronic pop have always made for some fine tracks, but seldom fine albums. In 2008, the band broke the trend with this electrifying magnum opus, a work that seamlessly melds intelligent dance music and irreverent pop.

## 14) For Emma, Forever Ago

Bon Iver

File under: A Lonely Singer/Songwriter Discovers His Walden Pond

Justin Vernon, the man behind Bon Iver, spent nearly four months locked in a remote Wisconsin cabin recording For Emma, Forever Ago, an album that has been flooring music critics with its cadre of lush, introspective compositions and heart-wrenching falsetto vocal melodies.

## 13) Attack and Release

The Black Keys

File under: Punk Blues and the Cosmic Cowboys

For its 2008 release, the minimalist-blues duo eschews its stripped down and thrashy punk roots approach for a more polished wall of sound, compliments of producer Danger Mouse. The result is indie-blues that's as spacey as it is rock solid.

## 12) Flight of the Conchords

### Flight of the Conchords

File under: Irreverent Kiwi Comedy for the Inner-Beta Male

HBO's comedy music group Flight of the Conchords describes itself as, "Formerly New Zealand's fourth most popular guitar-based digi-bongo acapella-rap-funk-comedy folk duo," which is an apt breakdown of its music. What the description doesn't cover, however, is that, unlike most comedy albums, the music on this one doesn't suck. In fact, steered by the super-hip and retro-tinged production of Mickey Petrelia (Beck's Midnight Vultures), the album is one of the few records of its kind, a comedy album that transcends its genre.

## 11) Feed the Animals

### Girl Talk

File under: ADHD Monster Mash-Up to End All Mix-Tapes

Girl Talk is actually one man — DJ, remixer and mash-up master Greg Gillis. Feed the Animals is a mash-up album that mixes so many genres and pop hits into its 14 tracks that it makes listeners' heads spin. Not for the faint of heart, the album maneuvers frenetically through as many as three-dozen or more samples on each track, never skipping a beat and elevating the mash-up genre to news heights in the process.

## 10) Santogold

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File under: Dancehall, Punk Rock, Hip-Hop, Reggae Sonic Melange

The debut single, "Creator", spurred some to label Santogold simply another M.I.A. knockoff. The subsequent album — a wild mishmash of styles ranging from club and hip hop to new wave punk and dub — proves Santogold is no clone and the eponymous album, no fluke.

## 9) London Zoo

### The Bug

File under: Transgressive Lo-Fi British Electronica and Dancehall

In the dark world of Kevin Martin, a.k.a. The Bug, the world is a ghetto, one in which MCs spit venomous Jamaican patois to the tune of sinister themes ("Angry," "Murder Me," "Insane," a few titles) and impossibly bass-heavy production. For fans of hip hop and dancehall, this under-the-radar album is not to be missed.

## 8) Acid Tongue

Jenny Lewis

File under: Indie-Appalachian Folk in Hollywood Rhinestones

Jenny Lewis is the undisputed princess of indie-alternative country and Acid Tongue ensures fans that the tiara will remain on Lewis's strawberry-blond head for years to come. Over the course of 11 tracks, Lewis freewheels through Americana, rock, country and gospel to create an album that's as Appalachian grit as it is Nashville sparkle.

## 7) Vampire Weekend

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File under: Afro-Pop in Polo Shirts and Plaid Shorts

Relying as heavily on preppy chamber pop as it does afro-beat rhythm and melody — the band describes itself as, "Upper West Side Soweto." Vampire Weekend and its self-titled album took the country by storm earlier this year. The band's cheerful and intelligent songs stop just short of sounding cloying and contrived and deserve a spot in music history next to both Paul Simon's Graceland and the Talking Heads' Remain in the Light.

## 6) You Have No Idea What You're Getting Yourself Into

Does It Offend You, Yeah?

File under: Raucous Disco-Punk Pumped Through a Vocoder

Like many of their British contemporaries, DIOY's amalgamation of electro-pop, dance rock and post-punk is nothing new. But in 2008, no artist did it better than the quartet from Reading, England. Equally driven by synthesizers and electric guitars, this debut album tops the countdown in terms of raw explosiveness.

## 5) Rising Down

The Roots

File under: Organic Revolutionary Hip Hop for the Soul

After 15 years of creating uncompromising live and recorded output, Philadelphia hip hop unit The Roots has amassed a large and intensely loyal cult following and remains the trailblazer of the jazz-influenced, organic and street-smart hip hop sound. Rising Down won't skyrocket The Roots into mainstream success, but for longtime fans, it is yet another worthy addition to the canon. Along with a cast of guest MCs and singers, lead MC Black Thought and company explore the realms of afro-beat, neo-soul, alternative hip hop and rock 'n' roll, all the while maintaining their trademark sound.

#### 4) Silent Movie

Quiet Village

File under: Aural Cinematic Exotica for Crate Diggers

The two-man production team that makes up Quiet Village creates music that is equal parts obscure electronica and spaced-out psychedelia. The music is atmospheric, introspective and relies heavily on rare samples, resulting in a unique album that resides somewhere between DJ Shadow's *Endtroducing...* and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. The breezy, lush meditations found on *Silent Movie* make this album the year's most cerebral sample-based album.

#### 3) Third

Portishead

File under: Late-Night Trip-Hop Soundtrack to the Post-Apocalypse

Fans of British-based trip-hop luminaries Portishead were forced to wait 11 years between 1997's self-titled album and *Third*. Fans feared a flop. The group delivered a demon. Here, Portishead trades the now-cliché break beats and synth pads of '90s trip hop for a more sullen, rough and punk-inspired approach, all while maintaining its signature electronic core and mysterious pathos. Amidst the record's stark production, singer Beth Gibbons' voice recalls a forlorn angel trapped in a claustrophobic nightmare. For the group's ever-patient fans, nothing could be better.

#### 2) Stainless Style

Neon Neon

File under: Conceptual Don Johnson Electro Pop Hop

A concept album based on the infamous automotive industry mogul-turned-drug trafficker John DeLorean, *Stainless Style* is a kaleidoscope of '80s-inspired electro-pop, hip hop and alternative sounds. The album is a collaboration between West Coast underground hip hop producer Boom Bip and Gruff Rhys, front man of Welsh rock band Super Furry Animals. Combining all the glitz and bounce of '80s electronic pop with the angst and subversiveness of underground hip hop, Neon Neon produced a genre-juggling masterpiece and one of the finest albums of the year.

#### 1) Dear Science

TV on the Radio

File under: Afro-Electronic Avant-Art Rock for the Masses

The Brooklyn-based TVotR is best known for pairing harrowed art-rock with haunted vocal melodies. On *Dear Science*, TVotR trades in some of the experimental indie hubris of its past albums for tighter song construction, big brass, electronic loops and (dare I say?) funky guitars. The result is career-defining music, electronic art rock that is as satisfying for the musical layman as it is for the indie-art-rock snob. Hands down the musical triumph of 2008.

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