

Bopping Around the Holiday Shrub

EW's music fiends on some of the year's best

Out with top 10 lists! In with ... something else. We're changing the format this year. EW's regular music contributors were asked to write a few words about three to five 2007 releases that they hadn't had an opportunity to write about over the course of the year, thus creating a list of cool stuff we didn't already tell you was cool. The resulting list looks like a wishlist: Dear bands, please come to Eugene next year! But we're offering it up as a shopping list instead. There probably isn't something here for everyone (for more options, check Brett Campbell's column on page 33), but we remain confident that every record on this list deserves a listen or two. Or three. Or maybe 12. Seriously.

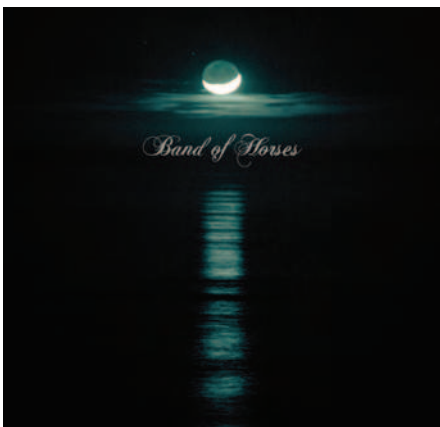
LILY ALLEN *Alright, Still* (Capitol)

I still wonder whether I would have loved Lily Allen as much if I hadn't first heard her while watching the video for "Smile," in which a saucy Lily gets revenge on a cheating boyfriend. I like to think, though, that her combination of infectious songwriting, attitude and heart would have made me fall for her *Alright, Still* regardless. Songs about her little brother being too stoned, her grandma being too old, boys being too stupid and London being, well, London? All with a perfect balance of brightness and bitching? Awesome. — MT



ARCADE FIRE *Neon Bible* (Merge)

If *Funeral* was their cry in the night, *Neon Bible* is Arcade Fire's awakening to a new dawn. Apocalypse has passed; the angels have risen. The demons are Biblethumping on street corners, and the band finds their footing in the dark spaces of anthemic salvation. Halfway through *Bible*, "Ocean of Noise" twists a chord of such crippling beauty, its plea is only hopeful to the overly optimistic: "This time we'll work it out." — CA



BAND OF HORSES *Cease to Begin* (Sub Pop)

As driving atmospheric guitars make room for the Carolina twang of Ben Bridwell's vocals, pushing "Cigarettes

Wedding Bands" to its zenith, it becomes clear why Band of Horses' *Cease to Begin* has shown up on Best of 2007 lists everywhere. Combining steady alt/rock with country-accented leanings, the gang doesn't travel far from last year's *Everything All the Time*. But I don't think anyone is too concerned when there's a single like "Is There a Ghost" out there. — ZK

Some reviewer questioned whether you'd have to be as stoned as Band of Horses sound to truly appreciate "Is There a Ghost," a song with an endless build and very few lyrics. The answer? No. Just close your eyes and let those eerie vocals carry you away, and float through the rest of the record as you would through a warm summer lake. Thoroughly buoyant, with a ripple of cold at the core, Band of Horses' second album is as irresistible as the first (though sure, that's partly 'cause they didn't tweak their winning formula much). — MT

DR. DOG *We All Belong* (Park the Van)

Listening to this Philadelphia fivesome is like finding that perfectly faded T-shirt at Goodwill on a lazy summer day. Their loose, lo-fi pop has all the familiar, raggedy charm of a secondhand shop without the thrift-store film left on your hands. Instead, they leave you humming their infectious Beach Boys-meet-the Muppet band hooks and harmonies for days. On their sophomore release, Dr. Dog sound like they're having the greatest time making music. And you'll have an even better time listening. — JO

BROKEN SOCIAL SCENE presents KEVIN DREW *Spirit If...* (Arts & Crafts)

Kevin Drew has described his "solo" effort as a "What if?" album, where questions of potential are probed but not necessarily pushed to such incohesive splendor as on that last Broken Social Scene record. Less jammy with more tuneful, stronger vocals, *Spirit If...* sneaks under your fingernails and, on repeat listens, grows you a golden beard of fuzzy Canadian warmth. The sleeper track, "Bodhi Sappy Weekend," is quintessential Drew, with BSS backup all the way. — CA



FIELD MUSIC *Tones of Town* (Memphis Industries)

When a band makes a significant splash with its debut album, as Field Music did in 2005, the follow-up often drowns in comparisons. But the second record from this Sunderland, England, trio simply got lost at sea, which is a damn shame. *Tones of Town* is brimming with effortlessly smart and catchy moments, and, with a tip of the hat to herky-jerky early XTC, Field Music quietly made one of the best pop albums of the year. — JO

FIERY FURNACES *Window City* (Thrill Jockey)

The world of Matt and Eleanor Friedberger is like a play acted on a set designed by M.C. Escher. Albums span generations and continents, single vocalists carry on epic three-way conversations, characters appear as fresh, radiant hopefuls and reappear moments later as aged, embittered malcontents. Like spoken-word dream sequences, the songs on *Window City* can at once be taken as literal and impressionistic experiences, encapsulating both the mind-boggling word play and layered musical minimalism that this brother-sister "garage rock" duo has made their signature sound. — AV

FREEWAY *Free at Last* (G-Unit/Roc-a-Fella/Def Jam)

On "It's Over," Freeway spits, "Things just ain't the same for gangstas but I don't give a fuck / I'm back without a Jus track." It's true Jus Blaze is a ghost on *Free at Last*, but Freeway doesn't care and neither should you. Free's street-worn rasp and cast of lesser-known producers power the soul samples and boisterous orchestral brass loops, making the album as catchy as a cold in winter. As DJ Khaled says — listennnn. — ZK



GRINDERMAN *Grinderman* (Anti-)

Nick Cave has always come across as the patron saint of dark impulses, and this brooding behemoth of an album is his official canonization. *Grinderman* is a snarling, sinister set of songs that gets back to the singer's damaged punk roots. With half of the Bad Seeds backing him, Cave gnashes his teeth on his favorite themes — love, death and violence — but this time it feels even dirtier and more disquieting than normal. This is rock and roll for your sinful side. — JO

EMILY HAINES AND THE SOFT SKELETON *Knives Don't Have Your Back* (Last Gang)

The crackly-voiced Haines is probably better known as the singer for Metric, whose wry, electro-rock *Live It Out* also got a lot of time in my CD player this year. But her solo album is something else: subdued, reflective, delicate and fragile. "I only wanted what everyone wanted since bras started burning up ribs in the '60s," Haines sings plaintively on "The Lottery," while on "The Maid Needs a Maid," she notes, dryly, "Bros before hos / Is a rule; read the guide-

lines." Her lyrics are often like a journal that's missing pages, emotional but obscured, evocative though you're not sure exactly what they're evoking, nostalgic but aware that nostalgia isn't getting anybody anywhere. — MT

HIGH ON FIRE *Death Is This Communion* (Relapse)

Harkening back to old school metal with great riffs and hooks, "Rumors of War" is one of the best pieces of thrash metal that's been recorded since the 1980s. High on Fire are the three horsemen of the apocalypse, and this CD provides the tribal-influenced soundtrack. — VS



JESU *Conqueror* and *Lifeline* (Hydra Head)

The godfather of grind (Napalm Death) and industrial (Godflesh) has enough street cred to do anything he wants. He's chosen the path of crushing weight and sweeping beauty. — VS

LES SAVY FAV *Let's Stay Friends* (French Kiss)

Let's Stay Friends, the first all-new release in nearly six years from Brooklyn stalwarts Les Savy Fav, begins with the rather self-mocking lines, "There was a band / Called the Pots and Pans / They made this noise / That people couldn't stand." But this is music to fill a void for those of use who still love our late-'90s/early-aughts indie/postpunk/college/whatever rock: rich, raucous, jaunty, layered, danceable, angular, energetic, full of piercing guitar lines and the occasional bit of electro-pop. LSF hasn't messed much with what works for them, but they've managed to make it sound new all the same. "Back before Babylon, shit was cool," Harrington says accusingly on the mood-swinging "Patty Lee." But this shit still is cool. — MT



M.I.A. *Kala* (Interscope)

Like previous M.I.A. concoctions, *Kala* contains tracks that are at once jarring and appealing, catchy and off-putting, raw and sophisticated in the extreme. Every ounce an artist (visual as well as musical), this Sri Lankan globetrotter collaborated with producers all over the world (including golden boy Timbaland) to craft her art-hop, dance hall, politics-and-poetry infused mosaic of percussion and genius sampling. Maybe not love at first listen, but give yourself a chance to acquire a taste for M.I.A. and you won't be sorry. — AV