

F a v o r i t e T h i n g s ~ A L B U M S '09

Bell Orchestre ~ *As Seen Through Windows* (Arts & Crafts). Alternating between patient restraint and bouts of joy, *As Seen Through Windows* is the sonic equivalent of sunlight through stained glass. The album dances elegantly on the border of modern composition, with the guitars taking a back seat to strings, brass and bells. The live show, with twin trumpeters dueling in the aisles, was an added treat, evidence that the band's members were as ebullient in person as they sounded on disc.

Last Days ~ *The Safety of the North* (n5MD) As the album begins, a family is preparing to travel to "the safety of the north," a promised wonderland of squirrels and bears. But tragedy strikes: a family member dies, and the bereft mourners must continue to sojourn. This is the story of how a child survives; she can't go on, she'll go on. When we hear the bicycle wheels shifting happily at the end, we know that Alice has made it through, and if she can, then we can as well.

múm ~ *Sing Along to Songs You Don't Know* (Morr Music). In the wake of Iceland's financial collapse, múm's trademark exuberance has been dented, muted, undercut. Their lyrics speak of perseverance, frugality and challenge. And at the end, a boatload of reassurance pulls into the dock. The last bonus track carries words of assurance: "I will teach you to sleep again, to eat again, to sing again." Honoring its cover, *Sing Along* is a candle in the wilderness, a glow among the green, a tiny beacon in a troubled land. The descendants of Vikings may be down right now, but as múm reminds the citizens of this seafaring nation, they've "seen it all before; it was in another world, that's all."

Aaron Martin ~ *Chautauqua* (Preservation). The album begins with organ and the solemn tolling of a church bell: a call to worship of sorts. And this is indeed worshipful music: grand, eloquent, funereal. These tracks begin with deceptive simplicity but gradually introduce startling complexities. An ineffable sadness inhabits the songs, an embedded, sorrowful yearning. By blending processed strings and home movies, Martin begets something utterly beguiling: an album that exists somewhere between the past and future, yet floats above the present realm like an escaped balloon.

Mono ~ *Hymn to the Immortal Wind* (Temporary Residence). A tale of soulmates lost and found, this concept album could have sunk under the weight of ambition. Instead, it rises like the spirits of its protagonists. The drums and guitar provide the plot, while the orchestra fleshes out the details. On their brief American tour, the band selected venues for their sonic properties, and conjured a cacophonous rumble that rocked the rafters and shook the pews.

Daniel Menche ~ *Kataract* (Mego). Over his long and storied career, Menche has experimented with the properties of noise, veering from the mildly accessible to the virtually unlistenable. For *Kataract*, he captured the sounds of waterfalls in the Pacific Northwest, and added sparse electronics, creating a wall of sound that would put any Phil Spector production to shame. Last year's *Glass Forest* was supposed to be his last CD; we can be grateful he returned for one more.

Efterklang and the Danish National Chamber Orchestra ~ *Performing Parades* (Leaf). This live album not only improves on *Parades*, but includes the videos from that release, plus a DVD of the concert. The mastering is so good, listeners will wonder, "Is it live, or is it Memorex?" "Polygyne" is a particular highlight. Everyone looks so happy, we can almost forgive their pointy hats.

Do Make Say Think ~ *Other Truths* (Constellation). Six albums in, and these veteran Canadians sound more vital and confident than ever. Not content to rest on their laurels, they've continued to add new sounds and textures. The tracks have grown longer, looser and brassier, while the tone has shifted from measured to celebratory. Lucky number seven awaits.

The Antlers ~ Hospice (Frenchkiss). Call it the Little Album That Could. This bedroom production began life as a CD-R before capturing the attention of NPR. By adding a band, Peter Silberman has given his compositions new life and a deeper resonance. The stages of grief are well-represented, culminating in an understated, hard won closure. If she'd heard this, Sylvia Plath might still be alive.

Jaxson Payne ~ Hopen (Koept). Only four people live on the tiny island of Hopen, 9 miles from the Norwegian mainland. We can imagine their isolation, their rugged, taciturn faces. And so, when we hear snatches of sleigh bells and distant choirs borne on the wind, we begin to wonder, have they gone stir crazy? Have they been saved by their own imaginations? Or is there really someone out there?

Songs ~ Vocal

múm, *Kripping*

My Brightest Diamond, *Feeling Good*

VNV Nation, *From My Hands*

I Like Trains, *Sea of Regrets*

Last Days, *May Your Days Be Gold*

Instrumental

Wixel, *Cloud Fields*

Wixel, *Friends (Parts I-III)*

Bell Orchestre, *Elephants*

Years, *The Major Lift*

Rhian Sheehan, *Standing in Silence Part 10*

The Year in Books

Laurie R. King, *A Monster's Notes*. Frankenstein's monster, alive, but not well.
Nicholson Baker, *The Anthologist*. How to compose an introduction to poetry.
David Nicolls, *One Day*. Two lovers, one day, 20 years; an alternate approach.
David Eagleman, *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*. Heaven reimaged.
Diane Ackerman, *Dawn Light*. A year of morning musings, season by season.

The Best Films of 2009

Coraline, *Red Cliff* (Chinese 2-part version), *Up*, *Up in the Air*, *Avatar*.

Upon Further Review: Decade Lists

Albums

Bjork ~ *Vespertine*

múm ~ *Finally We Are No One*

BJ Nilsen ~ *Fade to White*

Sigur Rós ~ *Takk*

Bell Orchestre ~ *Recording a Tape ...*

'Olafur Arnalds ~ *Eulogy for Evolution*

Zoar ~ *Clouds Without Water*

Szam Findlay ~ *Die Hautfabrik*

Kashiwa Daisuke ~ *Program Music*

Dusted ~ *When We Were Young*

Songs ~ Vocal

Joseph Arthur ~ *In the Sun*

Kidman & McGregor ~ *Come What May*

Death Cab for Cutie ~ *I Will Follow You ...*

The Killers ~ *Mr. Brightside*

Linkin Park ~ *<MYDSMR>*

Snow Patrol ~ *Chasing Cars*

Hansgard & Irglova ~ *Falling Slowly*

Doves, *There Goes the Fear*

Sol Seppy, *Enter 1*

Conor Oberst, *I Don't Want to Die in the Hospital*

Songs ~ Instrumental-Based

FC Kahuna ~ *Hayling*

Way Out West ~ *The Fall*

Fingathing ~ *Big Monsters Crush Cities*

Sigur Rós ~ *Hoppipolla*

65daysofstatic ~ *Radio Protector*

Bell Orchestre ~ *Salvatore Amato*

Saxon Shore ~ *Amber, Ember, Glow*

Domotic ~ *Smith, Klaus & White*

Yasushi Yoshida, *Greyed*

Sleepmakeswaves, *One Day You Will Teach Me ...*

Books

Art & Photography: Grushkin/King, *Art of Modern Rock*; Bernard Edmaier, *Patterns of the Earth*; Patricia Bolton, *1000 Artist Trading Cards*; Claire Nouvian, *The Deep*; Lynda Barry, *What It Is*
Non-Fiction: Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise*; Verlyn Klinkenborg, *The Rural Life*; Marilyn Johnson, *The Dead Beat*; Gavin Pretor-Pinney, *The Cloudspotter's Guide*; Betsy Burton, *The King's English*
Fiction: Mark J. Ferrari, *The Book of Joby*; Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief*; Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*; Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*; George Saunders & Lane Smith, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*.

Movies

Amelie; *After Life*; *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*; *Good Night, and Good Luck*; *Memento*; *Before Sunset*; *Hero (Chinese Version)*; *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotted Mind*; *Battle Royale*; *Coraline*.

Richard Allen