

2006 TOP 10 CDs, etc.

OK, here we go again! Back in 1998, Tucker and I started a correspondence at this time of year in which we expressed what 10 CDs held sway over our heads in that year. They didn't have to be released in that year, it was just a diary of what influenced us the most in that year. It turned into an email thing where Steve Carl and others chimed in and others joined over the years.

Remember, that's the rules: it didn't have to be a new release in 2006, it just had to influence your head this year. Last year was great, with Bonnie Wright, Jeff Scott, Jack Loughhead, Rick Zayas, Steve Carl, Steph Lovinger, Chico Huff, and Paul Jost all weighing in, and BOY did I get some good new recommendations that way. So let's do it again.

So think it over, look at your CD rack and jot down what you dug this year. I use these lists to discover new stuff to listen to and keep growing, so keep it going!

Here's my **Top 10 Most Influential CDs of 2006**, in rough order of importance:

- 1.) Dave Hartl – Lab Work. The first one really is unfair, but for honesty's sake I've got to start here. I had a sabbatical from school this fall and started working on what was tabbed as a sabbatical project back in March. And for $\frac{3}{4}$ of this year I've been slaving over this Todd Rundgren-do-it-all-myself project, about 70 minutes of music divided over 14 songs forming a big suite, in which I'm playing piano, synths, accordion, theremin, harmonica, guitars, and Chapman Stick as well as writing the whole thing and recording it into the Mac. Poor Bonnie Wright asked me for a track early in the year and never got it, my family has dealt with my mood swings, Jim Ryan was buttonholed into listening to the roughs, and this fucker has turned into an obsessive millstone around my neck that has cost me over a thousand hours of labor so far. It's in the last stages, needs to be mixed and mastered and then pressed into physical form so that it can be played on everyone's groovy teenage iPods or whatever. It'll sell dozens! So, very definitely, the most influential CD of 2006 doesn't even exist

yet (except on my computer so far), but I'm pretty damn pleased with it at the same time I curse it for being so goddamn hard! I guarantee it ain't like anything you've ever heard, a total mishmosh of styles and influences, featuring Joe Nero and Ken Pendergast on 3 tunes, Tokyo saxophonist Masahiro Fujioka on 3 tunes, Denny Wasko on a requiem, and thereminist Wilco Bottermans from Holland on 2 cuts. For me, this is the culmination of a lifetime of pursuing bizarre musical interests, all mashed together and bound to confuse even the most forgiving of my friends. If you add to this list I will send you a copy for free when it exists! Hah!

- 2.) Various artists – Maybeck Recital Hall Series. The second choice isn't a single CD. You see, back in the early '90's, Concord Jazz decided to record 42 of the Poets of the Piano that were out on the scene, not the Herbies and McCoys, but the second-tier players that couldn't get major label deals and were languishing in obscurity or local fame only. They were recorded at a hardwood and velvet-lined 60-person sanctuary outside Frisco called Maybeck Recital Hall, and almost all of these discs are out of print now. So this year I spent time on eBay and scouring the bins at the Princeton Record Exchange to track these CDs down. And every one of them is worth it and has value. It's a massive snapshot of pianistic possibilities, and I've spent several hundred hours listening to each of them and being expanded in my concept of how to play solo piano. If I had to pick out my favorites, they would have to include Roger Kellaway, Mike Wofford, Jim McNeeley, Denny Zeitlin, and Monty Alexander. But these discs definitely were only behind my own CD on what weighed heavy on my head this year.
- 3.) Prince – 3121. My son Miles is beginning to influence me after years of me warping him. He discovered Prince this year and we've been really enjoying all these CDs he made that I totally missed. Hell, the last time I heard his stuff was when Karen DeVito was prancing across the Wild Schwantz Lounge stage in AC with Mark Graham beating the skins. But Prince has been a busy boy, and there's gems all through his catalog. His new one from this year, 3121, is tremendous, and the last cut (Get On the Boat) featuring Maceo Parker (from James Brown's band) is the funkiest workout I've heard in years.
- 4.) Elvis Costello and Allen Toussaint – The River In Reverse. I like most of what Costello does, and how can you not like Toussaint? This joint project exceeds

what each of them has done on their own for years, and keeps revealing new assets every time I put in on.

- 5.) Brian Groder – Torque. An old trumpeter friend from West Chester days has been living in the Village for quite a while, spending some years playing with Cecil Taylor and building a unique style all his own. This latest disc from him features Sam Rivers and his rhythm section and is brilliant. I've been doing transcriptions for Brian and have spent hours pouring over details in these tracks, and it's all been worth it! A really unique blend of structure and spontaneity, and if he gets it out to the right people maybe they'll see that a new voice is here and ready to kick ass.
- 6.) Thomas Dolby – Forty. Dolby returns to live performance, and his one-man concert at the Sellersville Theater was my live music highlight of 2006. This is a live disc, available through CDBaby.com, the largest independent musician retailer on the internet, and the company I use for my own discs. It seems that Dolby made his fortune in a software thingy that's in most everybody's cellphone, so he doesn't have to play the record company game, and he's fearlessly going off on his own. New tunes are expected in 2007, and I'll wait in line anytime to check them out.
- 7.) Dave Holland Quintet – Critical Mass. Along with the Wayne Shorter Quartet, this is the absolute best jazz has to offer in this 21st Century so far. This new disc is arguably their best yet, and their group conception of time and meter is unique and only capable of forming when great musicians play together a lot over a long time.
- 8.) Ornette Coleman – Sound Grammar. At an age when I'll be happy to successfully manipulate a fork, Ornette blows down all musical cliches with sax, trumpet, and violin. I saw these guys at the Kimmel and after the Blue Hairs fled for the exits, my mind was opened to new areas of music that still lie on the frontier. A master, and a real return to profundity. It's hard to find, but worth seeking out!
- 9.) The Complete Roulette Live Recordings of Count Basie and His Orchestra (1959-1962). Up to now, when I feel like listening to a big band, I've turned to many phases of Ellington's career. But this Mosaic box set has given me a new option. Damn, these guys swung! A peak period of Basie's career, any cut on this set makes me smile.

10.) Ry Cooder – Chavez Ravine. This was released last year and I missed it. The first recording in years by Cooder under his own name, it's a snapshot of a scene from L.A. in the 50's when all the Mexicans were kicked out of Chavez Ravine in order to build a new stadium to welcome the arriving Brooklyn Dodgers to their new home. A combination baseball/ '50's R&B/ Mexican serenade kind of a groove, and a very singular record.

Honorable mention CDs:

Bob Dylan – Modern Times. Yeah, OK, break out the brickbats. But I like it and I don't care! One of the biggest influences in modern music stops being a middle-aged fart long enough to show you why he mattered in the first place.

Tom Waits – Mule Variations. Another one I missed when it came out. I am so glad Tom Waits exists on his own, 'cause I sure couldn't invent him!

Claire Fischer – Lembrancas (Remembrances). Why don't more musicians know this man? Latin fusion with subtle harmonic ideas and not a wasted note on the disc. Sublime.

Todd Rundgren – Liars. I missed this one when it came out 2 years ago, mostly because Rundgren's albums have been fairly tedious technical exercises for a decade. But here he lets loose with some real passion, ripping into all the different kinds of lies we are encouraged to believe in on a daily basis and the liars that promote them. If I come back again and can't have Howlin' Wolf's vocal cords, I'll settle for Todd's.

Neil Young – Living With War. Duh! Howcum this '60's relic is taking heat and almost alone in musically spearing our pinhead Commander-in-Thief? This CD could suck and still matter, but it doesn't – passion trumps technique yet again.

Don't Miss movies:

The Illusionist

The Departed

I loved these flicks!

Honorable mention: An Inconvenient Truth

Don't Miss books:

Against the Day: Thomas Pynchon

Any year that sees the release of a Pynchon novel is a notable one; it may happen only once more again in our lifetimes since the man is 69 years old and takes a decade to write a book. I've been digging my way through this one, taking copious notes along the way of all the characters you run across so I'll remember them when they show up 500 pages later, and the payoff is one of the most rewarding reads in my life. The jury is out, but I suspect this may be the one that bumps Gravity's Rainbow off my #1 spot favorite novel of all time. Intense, crazed, paranoid, hilarious, scandalous, intellectual and crude, this is the end product of James Joyce's capturing life on the page with 100 years of development layered on top.

TURK SINGER:

I read thru your list and was happy to find that being a non musician or intellectual, I actually knew (and worse, agreed with) some of your pics! My addition (granted, from a simmpleton mostly pop music standpoint) would be Bruce Cockburn's "Life's Short, Call Now". To me you can't go wrong with him...ever. Love his guitar playing, voice, songwriting and have for over thirty years, cannot ever imagine a time when he will not make me really glad I'm not completely deaf.

DAVE JACKSON:

Hi Dave, Thanks for your top ten list. I hope to hear your new cd. For me, I'd have to say that Metheny's THE WAY UP was the best cd I've heard this year. It's really deep, and it holds together all the way through. Then I've been digging on Sco's HAND JIVE, but that came out a few years ago-I missed it. Also, Brad Melduau's DAY IS DONE is very cool. Another great band is Gordin Goodwin's PHAT BAND. I highly recommend SWINGIN' FOR THE FENCES and his most recent one (forgot the name). Both are LA big band jazz at its finest.

STEVE CARL:

Hey Dog,

I'm afraid I haven't been listening to too many CDs this year. I listen to a lot of podcasts while walking to and from the train station, and my mp3 player stays loaded with the same music for months at a time due to laziness.

A couple of CDs I did enjoy are:

"Frederic Chopin: 19 Nocturnes", Arthur Rubenstein. Who, except maybe Horowitz, could play Chopin better than Rubenstein?

"Sequenza!", Eliot Fisk. For decades, John Williams has been my favorite classical guitarist for his dazzling technique, choice of music and perfect execution. Last fall I got to see Fisk play with Paula Robison (flute) at the Philosophical Society (about a block from where I work). I was certainly aware of his virtuosity before, but seeing him play changed my opinion of him. I've always known he had the same level of technical skill as Williams, or anyone else in the world, but he never had the perfect execution. Watching him, I realized why this was so. He constantly pushes himself to the very edge of what he, or anyone, should ever even attempt on the guitar. Williams would never attempt to grab some of the chord voicings he was going for, and rightly so, since there's a 50-50 chance of actually hitting chords that difficult in performance. For me, this was an extremely exciting performance. I've seen Williams twice, and probably won't see him again. I hope to see Fisk many more times. This recording is a combination of Domenico Scarlatti, Paganini (who was himself one of the best guitarists in Europe in his day. Fortunately for the world, Guiliani was the best, so Paganini focused on the violin), Mendelsohn, Beethoven and three pieces by Luciano Berio.

"Bach on the Lute", Nigel North. What can I say? I love the music of J.S. Bach, I love the sound of plucked string instruments, and this 4 disc set fills the bill.

I've listened to a few other CDs this year, but nothing really memorable. The best thing for me was the discovery of an Austing, TX (if you can believe it) public classical radio station - KMFA. They produce about a dozen different classical music programs weekly, and archive several weeks worth on their website: <http://www.kmfa.org/> I started by downloading their "Classical Guitar Alive" program (naturally), and then

started get the rest, which include programs devoted to Piano Music, Ancient Music, Organ Music, Woman's Music, Film Music, Shostakovich (2006 was the 100th anniversary of his birth), etc. All are presented by hosts who are very knowledgeable about the topic. For example, "Knowing the Score", one of my favorites, is presented by a composition teacher at the University of Texas in Austin. He chooses a composer, plays his music and discusses it. One recent program was about Ligetti, whose music I've certainly listened to, but know little about. I was unaware how radical his pieces for "2001: A Space Odyssey" were when they came out in the early sixties. Pure tone color, without harmony, melody or rhythm. Awesome. I'm sure you know a lot more about this stuff than I do already, but for me this is great listening - educational and entertaining at the same time.

Some of my favorite non-programming podcasts this year:

Real Time with Bill Maher. I don't have cable, so it's great to get a chance to listen to a smart, liberal who puts it to W every week and admits he still smokes weed.

The Onion Radio News. Recent headlines: "Ashcroft Rejected by Recently Created Bride of Ashcroft", "A Devious Rabbit Tricks Bush Into Signing a Gun Ban". Short, but funny stuff.

Any of the NPR programs available, for example "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me" and "This American Life".

The most interesting movies I've seen this year:

"For Your Consideration" directed by Christopher Guest and written by him with Eugene Levy. Starring his usual crew with some new additions (like Ricky Gervais). Very funny shit, as usual.

"Clerks II" written & directed by Kevin Smith. If you never saw "Clerks", shame on you. Rent it and watch it as soon as possible. Then watch this. After more than a decade of increasing exposure and budgets, Kevin Smith returns with a great movie that isn't a sequel, but a continuation. Don't blame him for "Jersey Girls". That's why he did this.

The best TV show of the year (on DVD): "The Office". The British version, of course, not the cheap, crappy, American imitation. "'You

can't take the rainbow without the rain'. You know what 'philosopher' said that? Dolly Parton. And people say she's just a big pair of tits!". If only American TV could come close.

Book: "New Rules" by Bill Maher. Talking about the Navy's use of Dolphins: "I remember when bouncing balls on your nose got you kicked out of the Navy!"

That's it for me, Dave. Sorry I couldn't turn you on to more CDs this year, but check out KMFA's web site. You might find something of interest there.