

Top 25 of 2006



A Red Season Shade – *the outcome fosters detachment*

Melodic post-hardcore from France that reminds me of a cross between Appleseed Cast and Sigur Ros. Lots of chiming guitars, excellent drumming, pianos, and some poppy vocal harmonies (on the songs with singing.) Pretty much the whole album is mixed as one long track, and the crossfading and blending works really well. Nothing revolutionary, but a really beautiful album nonetheless. Note the trees on the album cover – this will be a recurring theme this year for some reason.



Amon Amarth – *with oden on our side*

I don't care how bad people make fun of me for liking this sort of thing, this is a whoopass album that's pretty much everything I like about Viking metal. Fast drums and guitars, loud and aggressive arrangements, harsh vocals, and lyrics about battle, revenge, raping and pillaging, etc. Worth it just for the song about enslaving the Irish. A lot of these bands are made up of scrawny D&D nerds, but these guys actually look like they'd have no problem decapitating you and then raping your corpse. Vikings!



Amusement Parks on Fire - *out of angels*

Excellent noisy fuzz pop. You've heard this sort of thing before, but rarely done this well. It's sobering to think that the guy who wrote these songs and played most of the instruments was 20 years old when this was recorded. Jesus, I've done nothing with my life. And look – more trees!



The Angelic Process - *coma waering*

With just a cursory listen, this stuff sounds like the overdriven destructive meltdown of your speaker cones. But this isn't toe-tapping pop, so you'll have to put some work into it. Play it loud in headphones, really concentrate on it, and let your jaw drop at the beautiful melodies that emerge. Imagine My Bloody Valentine's angry, coked-up sister hitching a ride to the abortion clinic, and you're about halfway there. One of the best things I've heard in years.



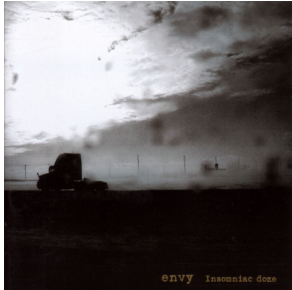
Bitcrush - *in distance*

Electronic shoegazer goodness. The mix of digital (glitchy drums) and analogue (piano) is interesting to hear. One of the most beautiful songs I've ever heard is on this album, and although I'm not happy about being pulled into the world of electronic music (even the outskirts, like this), it's still a great listen. I know you can barely see the cover, but yes, it's trees again.



Early Day Miners – *offshore*

These guys haven't made a bad album yet. Essentially everything they've ever done is absolutely stunning. On this record, the band took one of their best songs and reinterpreted it over and over again until they had an entire album. It's fragile and noisy, haunting and joyous, simple and contradictory and just about perfect. If you haven't heard this band yet then you're missing out.



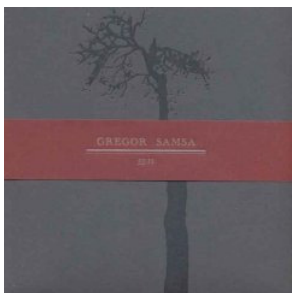
Envy - *insomniac doze*

Chaotic and emotional screaming (in Japanese) over beautiful hardcore guitars. An amazing album from start to finish. There's just something about Japan that gives them an edge on apocalyptic imagery, no matter what the medium. Must be a result of being nuked.



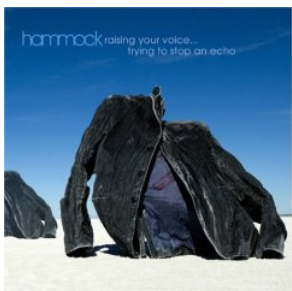
Fleeting Joys - *despondent transponder*

Neo-shoegazer with enough diversity and pop sensibility to rise above the herd. The singing is thankfully not too fey, and the guitars are nice and crunchy. Like a few other albums on this list, this one's not likely to blow your doors off, but I've found myself spinning it consistently since I picked it up, and there's really not a bad song on it. Also, best album title ever.



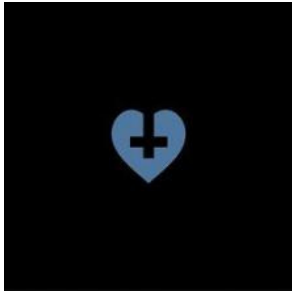
Gregor Samsa - *55:12*

Oh look, a tree on the cover. This is a tough band to describe. On the one hand, you've got slow, sparse instrumentation and male and female vocals blended together into some kind of Low / Labradford hybrid. On the other hand, you've got their penchant for touring and releasing splits with really heavy bands on hardcore labels like Revelation. I guess this is somewhere between shoegazer and post-rock, but with a slightly sad Southern mood and ambiance.



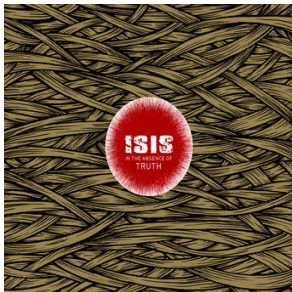
Hammock - *raising your voice ... trying to stop an echo*

I know – the cover looks like a crappy techno album (and really, is there any other kind?), but don't be fooled. This is Slowdive in a snowstorm, full of crystalline guitars and washes of sound and singing that drifts in and out of the mix. There are only a few proper songs on this album, the rest of it is short interstitial melodies and phrases that shimmer and fade into each other over the course of the CD. A beautiful record.



I Love You But I've Chosen Darkness - *fear is on our side*

I'll be the first to admit that this is the worst band name ever, but don't be put off by it. I was expecting some sort of emo "I hurt myself to feel" garbage, but these guys actually have an awesome 1980s post-punk Comsat Angels thing going on. The singing is deep and artsy and awesome, and this CD is well worth a listen!



Isis - *in the absence of truth*

It's difficult to describe this band without using the standard press clichés, but Isis are the archetype for the current crop of "epic metal" bands. The singing is low in the mix of a soup of brutal guitars, basses, drums, and keyboards, and the pace of each song is deliberately slow and sludgy. Beautiful and ferocious.



Jakob - *solace*

A 3-piece from New Zealand, these guys make the sort of atmospheric instrumental rock that's a perfect soundtrack for a rainy evening. Absolutely beautiful melodies build into explosions of sound, and the whole album seems to ebb and flow with a slow but inexorable tidal rhythm. Unbelievable. And hey, trees on the cover.



Jeniferever – *choose a bright morning*

So, in my head, The Cure are the best band ever. But in actuality, they kind of suck. Take all their epic soaring guitar lines, all their gut-wrenching vocals, and all their complicated song arrangements, then remove all their eyeliner and quirky keyboards and lyrics about fucking cats, and you'd have this album. It's break-your-heart amazing – the sort of thing that makes you want to crawl into a dumpster and curl up into a little ball and weep.



Jesu - *silver*

Slow, multi-layered sonic washouts, loud as hell, melodic, and introspective stuff from the guy who brought you Godflesh and Head of David. Having a legacy in the extreme music scene has not dampened the beauty of this album in the slightest. It's crushing and lovely, and there's another fucking tree on the cover.



MGR - *nova lux*

I guess the name is an acronym for Mustard Gas and Roses, which is actually pretty dumb, but once you fire this up all is forgiven. Full of ominous, sinister and sparse guitars and barely perceptible percussion, this is the soundtrack to waking up from a nightmare, and trying to learn something from the horror as it gradually fades from your consciousness.



Red Sparowes – *every red heart shines toward the red sun*

An instrumental rock epic that follows the story of the Great Leap Forward, more specifically recounting the great sparrow campaign – a mass killing of sparrows (along with rats, flies and mosquitos), that were seen as pests since they fed on a portion of the harvest. I don't understand how this instrumental stuff can really be 'about' something, but there you go.



Reigns - *styne vallis*

You need to buy this CD, because the packaging is an integral part of it. It's the story of a doomed town, abandoned after a mysterious (and probably malevolent) disaster. The band excavates the site, and provides field recordings of their findings. Creepy as hell.



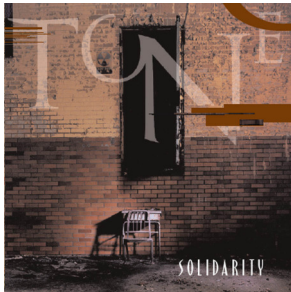
Steve Roach – *immersion: two*

I can't really describe this one because I've never remained conscious through the whole thing. I put it on every night before I go to sleep, and leave it on repeat all night. It's one single 73 minute track of mysterious, calm and introspective sound. A perfect environment for the deeper hours after midnight, or anytime a quiet, engulfing audio landscape is desired.



Russian Circles - *enter*

Heavy and complicated instrumental rock from Chicago. These guys tend to get lumped in with Isis and Pelican, but I don't really hear that. The songs on this CD are more intricate than your standard "epic metal" riffs. Whereas a lot of post-rock bands set out to take you on a slow building ride, these guys ask you to strap in, then put the pedal to the metal and burn rubber. They remind me of equal parts Don Caballero and Karma to Burn.



Tone - *solidarity*

I remember seeing this band back in 1996 or something, so you know they've been around. The concept is simple – two drummers, one bass player, and five guitars. Their early stuff was interesting, if a bit repetitive, but this album is a completely different animal. Equal parts head banging and foot stomping, there's a lot to take in here, but it's an enjoyable ride.



Windmills by the Ocean - *self-titled*

Band name not on the cover, no titles for the songs, so you pretty much know what you're getting. Heavy guitars, bashy drums, droning melodies, and a phase shifting effect to kill for (listen for it about 4 minutes into the first track). If this epic instrumental stuff is really the future of metal, then I'm all for it.



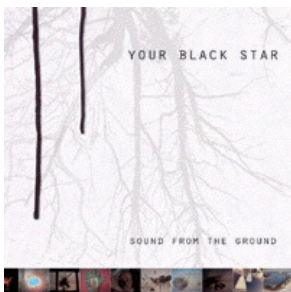
The Workhouse - *flyover*

Very British. This stuff is mostly instrumental (which is good), but the few songs with vocals are probably my favorite. The singer sounds a lot like the guy from the Wedding Present, and it fits really well with the guitar sounds used by this band. The music is alternately spacey and emotional, and reminds me a lot of the sort of dark pop of bands like Interpol or maybe even the Chameleons.



We vs. Death – *we are too concerned / we too are concerned*

Dutch postrock. These guys go a little too nuts on the trumpet (what the hell is it with Europeans and trumpets anyways?) but the drums are amazing and the guitars are plinky and interesting. There's a playful quality to the songs on here that's pretty refreshing as compared to the often too-serious tone of most music in this genre. It's worth tracking this down.



Your Black Star - *sound from the ground*

Another 1980s sounding band that just nails it. They've got a sort of Killing Joke thing going on with the vocals, the bass is perfect, and the guitars have that reverbed plucky thing that made Big Country such a cool band. Really excellent tunes here. Also, just because you put the trees upside down doesn't change the fact that they're still trees.