

2006's music hipster-approved



PAUL
BLINOV

CDS

1. TV ON THE RADIO—RETURN TO COOKIE MOUNTAIN

On their sophomore record, TV On The Radio managed to craft an album so spectacular and so different that even David Bowie had to add his seal of approval via backing vocals. It's sparse, sample-laden pop music that sounds like nobody but TV On The Radio, and, more importantly, sounds better than anybody else too.

2. BELLE & SEBASTIAN—THE LIFE PURSUIT

The Life Pursuit sounds like the work of a fresh-faced band of teenagers, not one that's been making clever music for a decade. The Scottish septet sings of perpetually late choir girls with troubled home lives, white collar boys and trying to make sense of this big ol' world. Lovely.

3. ANDRE ETHIER—SECONDATHALLAM

Andre recently got hitched, and this is his musical honeymoon: an album about being in love forever-and-ever. Drums explode on "In With The Prim," sounding like a celebration he's throwing for his newfound spouse. Elsewhere, he's tender and warm, singing "Little girl, little girl, well, you're always on my mind." D'awww.

4. AA SOUND SYSTEM—LAISSEZ-FAIRE

Ahh, the pride of having an ass-kicking local music scene is immeasurable. In a year when Edmonton bands made themselves heard across Canada (and the world), AA Sound System quietly released this gentle doozy of an album. Acoustic guitars meet electronic drumbeats, and processed guitars greet vocal harmonies, making *Laissez-Faire* a great addition to Edmonton's bubbling catalogue of hot music.

5. BECK—THE INFORMATION

Beck's strange, genre-twisting career has been hit-or-miss of late, but on *The Information*, he strikes an alluring peace between everything he's ever done before. It feels like a reinterpretation of some of his best ideas, and it sounds fantastic. The album begins with, "One, two, you know what to do!" and this time, it seems like Beck really does.

Shows

1. FINAL FANTASY—THE POWERPLANT

A freaking overhead was used. Yes, just like the ones found in high schools and shabbier university classrooms, an overhead was used as a visual background to Owen Pallett's effortless violin-looping, projecting images of twinkling stars, letters and a lover's kiss. The audience was so into it that Pallett received demand for (and gave) two encores. It was a show to remember.

2. SHOUT OUT OUT OUT OUT—THE POWERPLANT

It was a snowy March evening. CBC was sponsoring this free show and

the Powerplant was packed. S04 took the stage and degree-hungry students quickly devolved into a single jumping, bumping, sweaty mass. The only complaint I heard was from a friend who, due to the weather, had worn long johns under his pants. After the show, they were *drenched* with sweat.

3. FRANZ FERDINAND AND DEATHCAB FOR CUTIE—SHAW CONFERENCE CENTER

Deathcab's OC-approved, heart-felt melodies coupled with Franz's mischievous, charming Brit-rock? It seemed like a bizarre combo, but Deathcab got the crowd into a groove, then, switching gears, Franz lifted the sold-out Shaw Conference Center to their feet and got them dancing the night away.

4. ISLANDS—THE STARLITE ROOM

It was Halloween: costumes were abundant and the band started off with "The Monster Mash." Pumpkins were smashed, a knife was wielded by a band member (to no violent conclusion) and two audience members—one a robot, the other a bunny—were called onstage to dance with the band. All of this mayhem was a welcome addition to Islands' delicious pop.

5. MATT GOOD (SOLO)—MYER HOROWITZ THEATRE

I'll admit it: before seeing this show, I thought Matt Good's best days were behind him. But after his performance, I left with the knowledge that he hasn't even gotten started yet. He played the full spectrum of the MGB/solo catalogue with just a guitar in hand, making his newer material seem classic and the old songs seem, well, even better.

Consoles, conventions and games

New inventions, pow-wow cancellations and a lot of playing time graced 2006



RAMIN
OSTAD

2006 was a standout year for the video game industry. We saw *World of Warcraft* on South Park, the release of games such as *Gears of War*, rising anticipation for games like *Bioshock* and *Assassin's Creed*, the tragic end of E3, as well as not one, but two major console launches from Sony and Nintendo. Indeed, 2006 was a great year to play games.

BEST STRATEGY GAME: COMPANY OF HEROES, RELIC, PC

Relic has done some phenomenal work with real-time strategy games over the last two years, and *Company of Heroes* may have been their peak. The game forces you to think small, requiring tactical use of specific squad types without much time for planning beforehand. What you end up getting is a fast-paced, intense RTS game that can seem almost too hard at times—never frustrating, though—but always entertaining. The environments are diverse and highly destructible while the sound effects are startlingly authentic. *Company of Heroes* is really a hallmark achievement for Relic.

Runners-up: *Defcon*, *Dawn of War: The Dark Crusade*.

BEST ACTION/ADVENTURE GAME: THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS, NINTENDO, WII

The flagship title for Nintendo's Wii, *Twilight Princess* benefits greatly from the Wii-Remote/Nunchuck combination. The sword fighting is intuitive, the aiming is perfect, the art style is gorgeous, and the dungeons are massive and spectacular. The only real downsides to the game are its lackluster audio and texture work. Although these technicalities definitely could've been improved, they become forgivable when you consider just how enjoyable and expansive the game is as a whole.

Runners-up: *Okami*, *Bully*.

BEST ROLE PLAYING GAME: FINAL FANTASY XII, SQUARE ENIX, PS2

Simply put, *Final Fantasy XII* is probably one of the best games in the franchise. While it was initially met with heavy skepticism, *FFXII* has many things going for it. The controversial new Gambit Combat System makes a once stagnant combat structure fun, refreshing, and fast-paced. The game also looks amazing—both artistically and technically—and the story and voice acting are pretty damn good, too. The game's License Board upgrading system can be a bit frustrating at times, but it also allows players the freedom to completely customize every character in the game. There was definitely no other game like it in 2006.

Runner-up: *Oblivion*.

BEST SHOOTER: GEARS OF WAR, EPIC GAMES, XBOX 360

The big blockbuster in 2006 was definitely *Gears of War*. Sporting eye-popping visuals, it wasn't only the best looking game of 2006, but also one of the most intense. Using a mechanic affectionately called "stop-and-pop," the game forces you to stop and use heavy cover on a constant basis while popping up every few seconds to shoot at your opponents. The action is intense from start to finish (which comes far too quickly), and allows for you and a friend to play cooperatively through the main game, even over Xbox Live. *Gears of War* really has everything an Xbox 360 owner could ask for.

Runners-up: *Prey*, *Half-Life 2: Episode One*

BEST SPORTS GAME: NHL '07, EA SPORTS, XBOX 360

While one could argue that *NHL '07* is a fairly similar game to previous iterations of the franchise—and pretty bare-boned—the game's innovative skill stick feature makes it stand out from other sports games. By allowing players to control the hockey stick with the right analog of the controller, *NHL '07* allows for a much more intuitive control scheme that can make the game addicting to play. After a while, you begin to wonder how you ever played a hockey game before this one. The skill stick controls make *NHL '07* the best hockey game in years, and the best sports game of 2006.

Runner-up: *Fight Night: Round 3*

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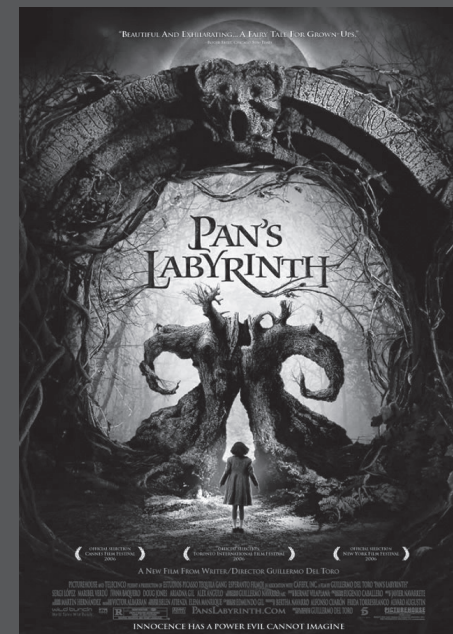
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