

# Jury's still out on winner of second Polaris Prize

While waiting for the announcement on 24 September, two of the Gateway's resident music geeks discuss the potential candidates



AMANDA  
ASH

Before I begin hollering and plugging for this year's Polaris Prize winner, I was one of the jurors who helped select this year's ten nominees. In no way are my thoughts, criticisms, or extensive bouts of musical knowledge indicative of the decision that will take place on 24 September.

Now, on to the good stuff.

When the shortlist for the 2007 Polaris Prize was publicly announced, I have to say I wasn't shocked or in any way surprised when the ten nominees were named. Of course, I would've liked to see a few more key albums receive a national pat on the back—namely Great Lake Swimmers' *Ongiara*, Wood Pigeon's *Songbook*, and Jim Bryson's *Where The Bungalows Roam*—but the ten discs that were chosen are nonetheless emblematic of what Canuck artists are brewing in their basements.

But with every prize there must come a winner. As hard as it will be to decide who should be awarded Polaris' \$20 000 prize, there are a few musicians who have crafted some catchy, finely tuned albums worthy of recognition and respect in addition to \$20 grand. That said, I can tell you who *shouldn't* find their names scrawled upon an oversized check: Feist, Chad Van Gaalen and—holy Jesus—Arcade Fire.

Both Feist and Van Gaalen are talented musicians, don't get me wrong, but they've already proved themselves to the world. Winning this award won't do much else other than crowd their already overflowing resumé. Sure, the Polaris Prize should be given to an album judged

“solely on artistic merit, without regard to genre or record sales,” as its credo states, but it's also a prize that should honor up-and-coming artists that haven't already found themselves swimming in oodles of recognition. This same argument applies to the Arcade Fire. The only reason I feel they were nominated is because they're one of Canada's best musical acts, not because their disc, *Neon Bible*, was any good. Imagine the headlines if they hadn't been nominated. Scandalous.

The Dears and Patrick Watson don't really stand out to me as a couple of rare gems just waiting to be placed on a golden throne, either. Are they worthy of their nominations? Most definitely. Are they going to win the Polaris Prize? Probably not.

The same goes for Miracle Fortress and Junior Boys. They're both a couple of little voices that, with a bit more punch and pride, would've probably made for some tough competition.

Now, what about the Joel Plaskett Emergency and Julie Doiron? Frankly, if either of these artists leave the gala on 24 September with \$20 000 extra in their pockets, I'll be happy. Plaskett's concept album, *Ashtray Rock*, is as flawless as the joints kids are rolling to his songs, and Doiron's *Woke Myself Up* is as beautiful as her satiny, pillowy voice.

But then there are The Besnard Lakes.

*The Besnard Lakes Are The Dark Horse* is an album title that sums it all up for those who have never heard of the band, but for those who have been keeping tabs on the Montreal artists over the last little while, you'll know that they're no underdogs. I mean, who can possibly incorporate Brian Wilson-esque melodies with atmospheric jazz and mystic rock & roll and still live to tell the tale? By far, The Besnard Lakes are my number one choice for the Polaris Prize. Out of all of the great music that came out of Canada this year, it'd be nice to see the Prize go to a band that really has something up their sleeves—even if it's a blow-up beach ball.



PAUL  
BLINOV

You raise some valid arguments, Amanda: I agree completely about Feist, Watson, and the Dears, although I'd place Julie Doiron in that category as well. Before I get to my bets, however, a word about the Arcade Fire.

It seems like I'm one of the few people hailing *Neon Bible* these days, with an outspoken group of playing the vicious wolf to the Montreal-based band's tender new release—hell, you yourself chose the words “one of Canada's best musical acts” when describing them.

True, the album doesn't reach the same cathartic heights that *Funeral* did, but that's because they're two very different albums. *Funeral* looks inward with naïvety, like a child learning to cope with loss for the very first time; on *Neon Bible*, that kid has grown up all crooked—bitter, but tougher because of it. It moved the Arcade Fire into new, darker territory without sounding like they were out of ideas.

Having gotten that off of my chest, I don't think *Neon Bible* will take the prize for the same reason that Feist won't—they're plenty big already. But the album deserves to be on this list for its own merit, not because of the band's well-developed reputation and influence.

A quick skim of the other nominees reveals some perks and flaws. The Junior Boys are a neat hybrid of dance and cold pop, but a little too left-field to secure juror votes; The Dears' *Gang of Losers*, while good, is probably the weakest release in their catalogue.

So, who does deserve the \$20 000 prize? Last year, Final Fantasy's *He Poos Clouds* stole the inaugural award with its brooding violin loops, roomy compositions, and artistic vision—upon a single listen, you know the guy had huge blocks of talent and the focused vision to mold it perfectly. *He Poos Clouds* was a pretty obvious pick, striking a balance between the bigger nominees like Metric and smaller hopefuls like Cadence Weapon.

The Besnard Lakes seem to have the same sort of thing going on—granted, they aren't restricted to the same minimal instruments that Final Fantasy was, but *Besnard Lakes Are the Dark Horse* is a kindred-spirit album, complete with prog-rock space-outs and smoggy, distorted riffs.

The problem is that it seems too similar to *He Poos Clouds* to win—the Polaris Prize is supposed to be cover any and all genres, and having winners in the first two years that both make a blacker brand of music would establish a certain sound that jurors are looking for, draining the credibility of Polaris, and destroying the whole point of having such an award in the first place.

So, after all that, my pick for the big win is Joel Plaskett. *Ashtray Rock* is unapologetically teen-aged—the glorious soundtrack to the massive nights of sneaking dad's six pack to your friend's house, and waking up with a hazy head that lacks memories ... then doing the same thing the next night. The inebriated, stumbling riff that opens the title track revels in its own smug glory, setting the stage for the extraordinary disc that follows. I like a band that's unafraid to give me some good pop chops; Joel's just doling them out, track after track. Balancing hooks with creative writing, *Ashtray Rock* is the perfect follow-up win to *He Poos Clouds*' frigid landscape, and fully deserving of a cool \$20 000.

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