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March 30, 2008

Announcing the Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge of 2008.

Yes, I know that talking about music here at CCLaP starts veering quite wildly from the organization's main mission (to promote literature and photography, that is), which is why I try not to do it too often, and as you can see am doing it this time on a weekend, and under the label of personal essay. And that's because I do have an interesting story going on in my personal life regarding contemporary indie-rock music, one that I imagine a lot of CCLaP's readers in their thirties and forties can relate to, which I think can be related to a lot of other mediums as well, which is why I think it's ultimately worth sharing...

In a nutshell, like many others, when I was an undergraduate I too was a snotty little indie-rock king, who worked at my local campus radio station and attended four live shows every week, going through countless crates of blank cassettes while duping off the newest albums down at the KCOU listening lounge. It's a natural place in the arts to turn to while young, I think, for all the obvious reasons -- the late nights, the sexiness, the relatively easy constraints of writing a pop song (versus writing an epic novel, for example), the hair and the clothes and finding your own identity through popular culture, and all the rest that has been well-documented about why rock

music appeals to youth so intensely. My point, though, is that it's a part-time job unto itself to keep up on the latest with any burgeoning underground scene; like mentioned, I myself used to listen to a dozen hours a week of college radio, at least briefly review 100 albums a month, easily spend \$200 a month or more on concert fees, drinks, CDs, t-shirts and all the rest.

As I went from my twenties to my thirties and now into my forties soon, I found like many others that my tolerance for the part-time work of it all to be waning; given that I was spending those years myself trying to keep up on the latest with underground writers, I soon found my listening habits stuck in the same late-'80s/early-'90s rut as when I was not so coincidentally a college DJ myself, and when I picked up the majority of my CDs; just endless listenings to Pavement, the Pixies, the Replacements, and all those other dinosaurs we old fogies embarrassingly request after getting drunk at wedding receptions. Which was fine for awhile, I suppose, but now that I'm trying to pursue a day job of being an "expert" in the underground arts, I figure that it will only help me to be as on-top of every aspect of the underground arts these days as I can. It was about six months ago that I made this decision, in fact, several months after getting CCLaP up and running to start with; and see, my personal music player happens to be a little iPod Shuffle, a cute little 1-gig thing that can hold around 150 songs once you add all the podcasts I'm listening to at any given moment too, and so I figured a good goal would be to have that entire iPod converted to new music and new bands as soon as possible.

That, then, has inspired me in the last six months to start following along at music websites for the first time, places like Pitchfork and Discobelle and What To Wear During An Orange Alert; and it's also inspired me to start listening to a bunch of "indie-rock song of the day" podcasts, not only independent groups like Indiefeed and La Blogothèque but also such radio stations as KCRW and KEXP. And lo and behold, about six months later I actually have turned over almost the entire collection of music on my iPod to new songs by new bands, through a combination of legal sales and legal downloads and some downloads that aren't so legal either; I was just doing some cleanup work on my iPod today, in fact, which is what got me thinking about the topic. Well, how about that! That's the most amazing thing about the entire subject, I think; that a mere half-year after being essentially clueless about contemporary bands, through a mere dozen blogs and podcasts I've been able to find at least 150 songs now that I've liked enough to download and install, bands that span the planet and fall on all kinds of levels of the general popularity scale.

This is such an easier thing than when I was an undergraduate in the '80s and '90s and trying to keep up with indie-rock myself, something I feel compelled to shout at my fellow middle-agers all the time -- that it's actually much easier to keep up with at least the general contours of the indie-rock community than you might imagine, even if of course you're never going to become an "expert" on the subject through such a thing (nor should you want to; leave the "indie-rock expert" stuff up to the kids, I say, who can afford all that time and money spent on all those concerts and clothes). It's intimidating, I think, to approach any fast-moving facet of the arts once you've been out of it for awhile, whether that's a former DJ getting back into the music scene like me, a former writer who wants to know the latest with the literary community, a movie buff who's lost touch with the festival circuit, etc etc. These are chaotic, rapidly-changing environments, dominated by people much younger and better-looking than us, leaving it an intimidating thing for people "of a

certain age” to just throw themselves into again feet-first; just ask me how much of an idiot I’d feel like, for example, if I were to attend one of these sweaty 2 a.m. house parties where all these electronic musicians I listen to perform live, or how out-of-place I’d be among all those Last Nights Party tube-top-wearing zoned-out hipsters.

It’s been nice, then, to discover that I can now do a lot of this research and checking-out of bands online, and that the entire infrastructure has been set up to easily accommodate and support this -- thousands of musicians who provide songs for free, leading to thousands of podcasters/personal DJs who have lots of material to legally play, leading to thousands of basement labels and distributors and promoters helping these musicians and podcasters and listeners all find each other, all connected together through a dozen high-profile “hubs” for the intelligent music lover, places like iTunes and YouTube and iMeem that make actually listening to and buying these songs a snap. My own challenge to become more “with it” has been going great as a result, something I just felt like sharing here with all the people my age feeling intimidated about getting back into it all again. Really, it’s not as bad as the last time you were doing such a thing, no matter what medium you’re talking about.

So are you curious as to my new indie-rock iPod stats? Well, I’ve got a grand total of around 110 different bands stacked up in my Shuffle now, all of them bands I had never heard of six months ago, reflecting the main way I find new music, one promotional single at a time given out by the bands and featured on podcasts. Of those 110 bands, though, there are 11 I’ve liked enough now to download their entire latest CD and keep the entire thing too; they are...

Battles [top 5]
Feist [top 5]
The Field
Jens Lekman [top 5]
Justice
Laura Veirs [top 5]
LCD Soundsystem
The National
Of Montreal
Pablo Sciuto
Spoon [top 5]

And then there was that new album by Radiohead, which I picked up too, and I also picked up an older album by Saint Etienne because of one of the podcasts I listen to doing a retrospective of them earlier this year. Which I guess is the final irony of it all; that apart from Radiohead and Saint Etienne, I have absolutely no idea how relatively famous or popular these other 11 “best liked bands of the last six months” are with the population in general. I mean, I can see from their online bios that some have been on Letterman and world tours, others not much more than kids in their basements; but it’s extremely difficult for me to keep all that info in my head when I’m actually just listening to my iPod on random mode, or to get the kind of ad-hoc group opinion of a band that you can when, say, living in a college dorm and walking down the hallway listening to stereos. And that’s something else that I think remarkable about the times we’re living in; that I can have this whole iPod full of favorite new music, and literally not be able to tell which were done at a million-dollar Los Angeles studio to support a million-dollar marketing campaign and million-dollar Grey’s Anatomy corporate tie-in, and which were done in GuitarBand in a

basement in Akron, Ohio, while the family was away so that they wouldn't make any extra noise on the recording. I know I've talked about this to death at the site, but as someone who came of age in the DIY punk/zine environment of the early-'80s, I just still find this latest turn of events remarkable, that independent artists can not only create and release their own work but that it's virtually indistinguishable at the end from any mainstream big-budget project.

Anyway, I guess that's enough musing on the subject for a Sunday afternoon. Make sure to come by again in another six months for my one-year report on the "Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge of 2008."



July 27, 2008

The Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge: A mid-year report.

Regular readers will of course remember The Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge of 2008 that I issued to myself earlier this year, and urged other people to issue to themselves as well; that is, the challenge to get all my sad old '80s and '90s indie-rock off my little r-gig iPod Shuffle as quickly as possible this year, and get it all replaced with brand-new music by contemporary bands I'd never heard of before. Think of it as a little middle-age challenge to myself, for reasons detailed a lot further in that original essay; a challenge to get re-acquainted again with a subject from my youth I had lost track of, and that I had been intimidated about getting involved with again precisely because it being such an intensive, youth-oriented subject, just like other middle-aged CCLaP readers undoubtedly feel about things like poetry open-mics, their city's art-gallery scene, the world of independent film festivals, etc. Being a member of the Creative Class myself (or the Bohemian Bourgeois, or the Renaissance Generation, or whatever the hell you want to call it), I have many of these kinds of issues affect my personal life just like yours, and I thought it'd be fun for example to track the results of one such experiment from my personal life here at the website, for fellow middle-agers feeling anxious and cowed about re-approaching such a subject themselves.

In fact, reading that original essay earlier today in preparation for writing this one, I realized that there was a major

point to all this that I failed to originally get across; of the entire reason behind taking on such a challenge to begin with, and the relatively gentle goals I have for myself as a middle-ager merely traipsing across the surface of the subject. Because really, the whole reason this challenge came about in the first place was because of having this random experience in my life last year while out running errands one day, in the fall of 2007, where I kept flipping through songs on my iPod and flipping through songs, not able to find anything I was happy with, until finally just realizing – “My God, am I sick of the music I currently own.” I dismally realized, in fact, that at the tender age of 38, I had become that person I used to make fun of in my early twenties, that person completely out of touch with what was going on with the contemporary scene, whose entire beginning and end of knowledge about what people younger than me were listening to consisted of Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake and the like. I realized that my iPod had become this sad little cobwebby time capsule from another age, all REM country-rock-years and Pavement before they sucked, The Police before expensive reunion tours and The Smiths before Morrissey became a lounge singer.

It was never my goal to become highly intelligent again about the indie-rock scene, or even necessarily conversant except in perhaps the most general cocktail-conversation-with-NPR-weenies kind of way, certainly never to be in a position where I could impress someone else with my indie-rock knowledge; because frankly, here at the age of 39, I don't care that much about indie-rock anymore, and feel that it's a pursuit mostly for the young, for those who can afford all those concerts and can stay up that late to begin with, who don't mind the noise and the crowds and the pretentiousness and all the other things I myself can no longer stand. Instead, my goal has merely been to no longer be an idiot about the subject; to at the very least have an iPod full of new music I'm not completely sick of, to know at least a few musicians by name, to go from buying no albums in the last year to buying some albums. And really, I think this is the case for most people my age and in my position, those feeling frustrated about losing touch with an artistic community they used to be a part of; it's not that they want to take a leadership position within that community again nor be able to out-hipster anyone else, merely that they want to add just enough of it all again to have fun, to recapture that sense of play and random joy inherent in the process of discovering new artists and new projects.

That's why I had to laugh, after all, after hearing recently of this new software some group is working on these days, that is supposedly going to do nothing but check your iPod library for crap songs (filler tracks, conversation tracks, tracks you simply never listen to), and make sure that your device will skip over those songs whenever you have it on random-play mode. And I laughed, of course, because with my little 1-gig Shuffle I don't have the luxury of bad tracks in the first place; the entire device only holds around 150 songs altogether, once you subtract the space I need for the podcasts I listen to, which now that I have new songs coming into my life on a daily basis means that I am constantly having to judge on a case-by-case basis which will be included on my player, am constantly having to delete older songs to make space for newer ones. And this is a great thing, almost one of the most pleasurable experiences of the entire Great iPod Challenge, but I can just imagine the conversation that would ensue with a typical consumerist American concerning the subject...

ME: So instead of spending all that time and energy

creating this smart filtering software for your iPod, why not just carefully pick and choose which songs you put on there in the first place?

CONSUMERIST AMERICAN: Because I have a 60-gig iPod, and it's easier for me to simply buy an entire CD and just dump the entire thing onto it.

ME: Okay; so why not sit down on a regular basis, listen through all these songs once they've been on there for a bit, and then manually delete the ones you don't want to listen to anymore?

CONSUMERIST AMERICAN: I don't have time to do that! What are you talking about? Do you have any idea how much work that would be?

And see, there's the key right there; to have fun with the arts, to really enjoy the process of discovering new artists and new projects, you need to stop thinking of such things as *work* and instead as a chance to *play*, an activity to do during your leisure time instead of the crap you're currently doing and barely enjoying at all. For example, since the Great iPod Challenge started up last January, I myself have had three such days like the one just described, Saturdays or Sundays where I sat down and devoted the entire afternoon to nothing else but listening through old songs and determining which should go, freeing up 20 to 30 percent of my device's entire memory by the time I was done (30 to 50 songs), to make way for all the new songs I'd be adding over that next month or two. But in my particular life, see, the only thing that Saturday afternoon was replacing was a Saturday afternoon of laying around on the couch, watching sad old re-runs of television shows I didn't particularly like in the first place; when looked at that way, I don't consider these times of cleaning out* my iPod as "work" at all, but rather a hell of a lot more fun than another Saturday afternoon of Cheetos, Stargate: Atlantis, and heavy sighs of soul-crushing ennui.

When we say to ourselves that we have "no extra time" in our lives, for most of us that's actually a subtle lie we tell ourselves; in actuality, it's more that we're spending the extra time we do have unwisely, being passive consumers instead of active engagers. This is the main point I wanted to make in the first place, by writing about my Great iPod Challenge here; that it's actually easier than you think to make the arts a semi-active part of your life again, or at least to understand the general contours again of what's happening in the "underground." For the last seven months of my life, I've spent around a half-hour each morning downloading and listening to all the latest MP3s at all the music websites I follow (see my original essay for specifics), then around an hour or two each weekend doing the same for the music podcasts I subscribe to, then one afternoon every couple of months doing a major cleaning of my iPod like mentioned; these actions and these actions alone have brought a whopping 480 new songs into my life that I've liked enough to keep, basically filling my Shuffle three times over and making the Great iPod Challenge a roaring success. And I bet when you stop and look at it, in reality most people have this kind of extra time in their lives that they could be devoting to such a thing, 15 to 30 minutes a day plus an hour or two on the weekends; granted, you'll never impress a 21-year-old with this kind of commitment, but why the hell do you care about impressing 21-year-olds? 21-year-olds are idiots. Remember when you were 21? Remember what a freaking idiot you were?

So should I end today by throwing out some stats and lists at you, like every good indie-rocker should? Okay! Here, for example, are the latest ten musicians/bands I've downloaded to

my iPod, all within the last week or two (July 2008)...

Emily Wells**
Ratatat
KnowSleep
Kunk
PAS/CAL
Diskokaine
David Aussi
Thunderheist
SchÄdelverletzung
The Constantines

And then here are ten bands who have actually made it through all three major iPod cleanings I've had this year, bands that have been on my Shuffle now from four to six months and are still being highly enjoyed...

Hibernate
Boat People
Mexican Institute of Sound
Sia**
The Heavy Circles
Headlights
Spoon
The Field
Bitter:Sweet**
Pablo Sciuto

And then of this entire process, of the hundreds of bands I've downloaded and listened to since the year began, there have been roughly half a dozen now that I've grown to have a deep love for; these are the artists, for example, who I would see in concert if I were a younger and more cash-flush man, the musicians I would go out of my way to see on television if I heard they were making an upcoming appearance...

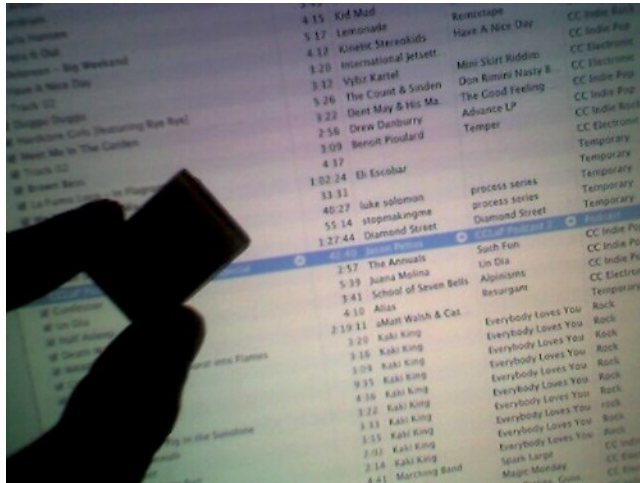
Battles
Bebel Gilberto**
Feist
Jens Lekman
Justice
Laura Veirs**

Radiohead (although to be truthful, I already loved Radiohead before this year; I just mean that their latest album *In Rainbows* is infreakingcredible, maybe the best they've ever made, even more astounding when you remember that they gave it away for free when it first came out to anyone who wanted a copy)

It's this last list, I think, that most profoundly shows that the Great iPod Challenge has been a success; half a dozen CD purchases in six months may seem piddling to most undergrad college DJs, but that's six more than I purchased in 2005, 2006 and 2007 combined. I consider this a great success as far as the challenge is concerned, and proves that just a little effort can produce a plethora of results when it comes to artistic subjects like these; it's a lesson I think can be applied in a whole lot of other situations, one I would encourage frustrated middle-agers like myself to apply to their own lives. And speaking of which, I'd love to hear your further thoughts on all this, as well as success stories from your own life; I encourage you to leave your own comments below, or to come by the website if you're reading this through RSS.

*And there is of course a final thing to understand about these “cleaning” days I have once every couple of months; that these afternoons consist not just of re-listening to songs and deleting certain older ones, but also looking up bands’ websites online at the same time, checking out photos and videos, reading their biographies at Wikipedia, coming across interviews, basically learning things about them I didn’t know before, which makes me understand and appreciate their music even better. This is ultimately what I mean by making such a thing an act of play instead of work; that instead of looking at it as a four-hour chore being forced on you on a Sunday afternoon, drudgingly going through old songs and cleaning up files, you should look at it as giving yourself permission to have four hours of unstructured fun on a Sunday afternoon, heading in whatever random direction online you feel like going, doing nothing but listening to music and watching videos and looking at photos, lollygagging over stupid pointless MySpace silliness as long as you want. And isn’t that ultimately more fun than four hours of laying on your ass watching bad Canadian science-fiction television shows?

**Discovered through Starbucks! Will miracles never cease?! Say what you will about the company itself (Lord knows I’m not exactly a fan); someone there in the corporate headquarters, though, is making extremely good choices as to what musicians and songs to feature in their ongoing “iTunes Single of the Week” promotional campaign. Ah, to have that job, I’m telling you.



October 24, 2008

Regarding the iPod as personal adult-contemporary radio station.

So here we are, ten months now into the Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge of 2008, and things couldn't be going better; in fact, you could argue that the subject is of even more relevance to my life than ever, given that I'm now doing a monthly podcast myself devoted to showcasing the best of the latest free indie-rock music I'm finding online. That's been keeping the music flowing onto and off of my little 1-gig iPod Shuffle faster than ever, which regular readers will remember was an important detail of the original Challenge; not to become any kind of respected expert again on the subject of college music, after being fatally out of touch with the subject for over a decade now, but merely to get all my sad old '80s and '90s music off my Shuffle and replaced with brand-new music as quickly as possible.

And so to just run the numbers for a minute, here at the third-quarter mark of the year-long experiment....Since I like to keep around 250 megs of my Shuffle free at any given moment for my latest podcasts, that means I can have around a hundred songs altogether on my Shuffle at any given moment (or approximately 500 minutes of music, or eight hours, or nine CDs' worth, however you want to think of it); and right now, between all the music blogs I read and music podcasts I listen to, plus private research and reader suggestions, I seem to be downloading and keeping about an album's worth of new legal free music every single week these days, 10 to 14 songs by 10 to 14 different artists.

Which when you add it up, means that I'm essentially refilling my entire Shuffle with new music once every two or three months; and that's why I sit down on a Saturday afternoon once every month or so here at home and do a major purge of my Shuffle, removing by the end somewhere between 20 and 40 songs altogether, or a third of the entire contents. And so that's why the majority of the music on my Shuffle at any given point is six months old or less, some of it six to nine months old, a little of it nine to twelve months old, and nothing at all older than a year, from when the Challenge first started.

In effect, it's turned my crappy little \$70 Shuffle not just into a low-end standalone music player like it was designed by Apple to be, but into an entire one-man mainstream adult-contemporary radio station, with all the benefits that come with that – brand-new music from a variety of sources, constantly updated and rotated, with the more popular songs played slightly more often (and with always a chance to skip over a song if I'm not in the mood), but with still a semi-random aspect to it all. But here's the thing – it's a radio station I as the listener program, all by myself, without the need of a DJ or programming director, with every song guaranteed to be something I like or even love, and with no commercials or insipid on-air banter, or crappy songs slipped into heavy rotation because of a payola scandal, or any of the other things that usually drive people away from commercial radio stations. And that's...well, that's astonishing, in my opinion, literally the realization of the science-fiction dreams my friends and I used to talk about back in school in the '80s and '90s, back when we'd fantasize about how great it'd be to run our own pirate radio station.

Because see, what I'm talking about is different than simply owning an iPod full of interesting CDs; my Shuffle contains almost nothing but brand-new singles by a whole variety of different bands in different genres, as many different bands as there are songs and with no filler at all, none of the crappy little filling-time tracks that come with loading entire CDs to one's iPod. And when you combine the "random play" mode on my iPod with the option to weight the playlist by popularity, even listening to this music is much more like a radio experience than a Walkman one; the same exact exact experience, for example, as walking into your corporate job in the morning, hanging up your coat in your cubicle, and flipping on the radio sitting next to your computer there. What it essentially does is put the power of a full mainstream radio station directly into my hand, without needing the endless amount of middlemen who traditionally used to come with such a situation: since the labels directly "send me" the music (via public song posts at label sites, band MySpace pages, generalized music blogs, etc), there's no need for a programming director or label rep; and since there's no need for a soundboard or a broadcast booth or a human actually mixing the songs together, there's no need either for a DJ. And since none of these people need to get paid, there's no need for an advertising staff, which of course is part of the catch-22 of ad-driven creative projects; that the more popular you get, the more ad people you need and the more power they are given, eventually ruining the very thing that was inspiring the need for all those ad people in the first place. With the situation I'm talking about, you can simply skip over all these people, while still not losing the access to thousands of free songs and expert opinions on what's best that traditionally used to only come with a big expensive place like a mainstream radio station.

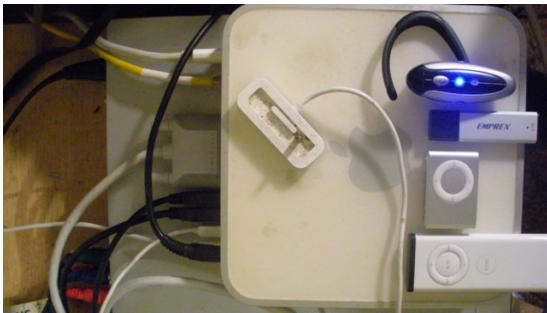
And in fact this gets us into the rapidly and profoundly changing nature of arts administration unto itself, the thing I do for a living too but in the world of books; because to be frank,

this is an accusation I get on a more and more regular basis now, that people like me (i.e. the new generation of cultural arbiters) are simply replacing the people we rail against and complain about (i.e. the old-skool “cultural gatekeepers” of such places as paper publications and radio stations), that we are merely doing the same exact thing as they did, but now through online means and while pointing out hipper stuff than them. But that’s simply not true, and you can look at the music blogs I follow for a perfect example of this, places like Discobelle and What To Wear During An Orange Alert; like me, none of these places are declaring that their picks are the only decent things out there, but merely acknowledging the huge unending plethora of cool things out there, and merely saying, “Here’s the little bit of stuff we’ve come across that we thought was cool, but you should definitely keep looking on your own for yet more cool stuff.”

That’s the difference between someone like me and an old-skool literary cultural gatekeeper, someone like a New York Times book reviewer or Simon & Shuster editor; those people tended to say, “Here’s the stuff I’ve declared cool, and you shouldn’t even bother with anything else besides what I’m telling you to check out. Certainly you should never take anything seriously if it was self-released by the artist, or exists only in electronic form instead of a physical one, or not put out by a ‘reputable’ company and with other ‘reputable’ cultural gatekeepers telling you it’s decent.” That’s another thing that all this technology is rapidly making obsolete; because when you have a Sony Reader and a broadband connection (or an iPod and a broadband connection, or a Kindle and a broadband connection), suddenly you have direct access to much more creative work than you’ll ever possibly have the time before you die to consume, and no longer need someone making sweeping declarative statements regarding what “rocks” and what “sucks” and so on and so forth.

That’s certainly not what I’m looking for, whenever I frequent the music blogs and podcasts I do; I’m looking more for a gentle guide, a gentle advisor, someone who simply points me in the right direction and with some tips on the matter, but leaves the majority of the individual wandering and browsing up to me. I now pick the 12 new songs a week that will go into heavy rotation in my life, not a bunch of random strangers at a radio station; this new generation of cultural arbiters simply point out the 100 or 150 songs from which I pick those 12, plus tell me more about the context behind the music, plus tell me more about the latest in general music trends. That’s what I want from my cultural arbiters, not just some pretentious hipster doofus telling me, “Listen to this, don’t listen to that, this rocks, this sucks;” that’s why I pick the music experts that I do, and that’s how I try to write my own recommendations of artists and projects here at CCLaP.

I’m telling you, who knew I would stumble across so many fascinating philosophical issues about the arts in the 2000s, when deciding back in January that I was simply sick of all my old Pavement and Replacement albums? It’s been a fascinating thing, seeing how all this new technology is profoundly changing the very way we think about the arts; all in all, I have to declare the Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge of 2008 to be a runaway success. I hope that you think so too, and that you are enjoying these days the monthly little music roundup that I put together here myself. And of course, around Christmas I will have one more official entry in this Challenge series, at the same time at CCLaP’s 2008 Year in Books report, telling you in final terms how the one-year music experiment went. I hope you’ll get a chance to stick around for that.



December 16, 2008

The Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge: A wrap-up.

Well, so here we finally are, at the end of the Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge of 2008; for those who don't know, it's a twelve-month experiment in the arts I've been tracking at the website all year, to see how much work and time it might take me as a clueless middle-ager to get all my sad old '80s and '90s college rock off my little 1-gig iPod Shuffle (around 125 songs altogether), and replaced with brand-new songs by brand-new artists. I've been writing reports on the process every three months this year; and now that we're here at the end of the Challenge, I finally have the chance to put together some year-long statistics and show rather objectively whether or not it was all a success. Because when all is said and done, a year after the Challenge started, I now have around 250 new "radio-single" style songs on my hard drive that I didn't have before, ones I liked enough to specifically download, install to iTunes and save copies of; then add the 21 new CDs I acquired this last year as well (all released within the last 18 months), at an average of 12 songs per CD, and that's a grand total of 500 decent songs I've added to my life in the last year, enough not just to fill my Shuffle but fill it four times over, fill it completely with new music once every three months in 2008.

In fact, before anything else, it might be useful to explain exactly how the Challenge itself unfolded, because it actually consisted of several different steps over the course of the year; right at the beginning, for example, was the only time I did

anything smacking of illegal, when I downloaded simultaneously all 20 of Pitchfork.com's top albums of 2007, and uploaded them all at once to my iPod as a way of doing a simple initial sweeping of the cobwebs. I spent all of January, then, simply listening to these CDs, quickly pulling off songs or entire albums I didn't care for, and putting together the first of the couple dozen music podcasts and blogs I was to start paying attention to this year; by the beginning of February it left me with at least a couple of songs on my Shuffle from the following 14 artists, to constitute a "first round" of sorts for the Challenge:

Battles
Deerhunter
Feist
The Field
Justice
Kanye West
LCD Soundsystem
Jens Lekman
Liar
Lil' Wayne
The National
Of Montreal
Radiohead
Spoon

Like I said, though, I always considered these CDs a cheat, songs already a year old and all recommended from a single source, ones I gained illegally on top of everything else, when in fact I was more interested in gathering music from a variety of sources and with the full permission of the bands themselves. That's the grand promise the kids and Cory Doctorow are always making, right? That you can make your life artistically rich anymore merely from free legal stuff online, and that these artists all eventually benefit from it in the long term too? That was definitely part of the iPod Challenge, not just to fill my device up with new music but to see how much of it could be had for free from legal sources, all those endless "song of the day" blogs and label MySpace pages and radio station podcasts. And that's why I wanted to get the 14 CDs listed above off my system as quickly as possible, and why at the end of the year I have a grand total of only three of these songs left on my Shuffle, one each by Radiohead, Jens Lekman and Battles. (Oh, I love you all so much, ya freakin' nerds!)

As winter progressed into spring earlier this year, then, I got comfortable with my new regular musical habits: of spending about 20 minutes every morning, for example, downloading and listening to the latest songs being delivered by such blogs as Pitchfork, Discobelle and What To Wear During An Orange Alert; and then spending an hour each Saturday doing the same for the eight music podcasts I subscribe to, places like IndieFeed and Minnesota Public Radio. That's like skipping one dinnertime sitcom rerun a day to do this stuff instead, skipping one bad Canadian low-budget science-fiction television show each Saturday; and that's enough to lead to a whopping seven to ten new songs every week I've liked enough to keep, or 20 to 40 every month. If you consider the average CD to have twelve songs, for example, that's two to three entire CDs' worth of great new music for free every single month, all from 20 minutes of busywork a day and an hour each weekend. And this is indeed one of the first major things I learned by taking on the Challenge this year, something I've talked about in earlier reports too, of how the problem in a lot of our lives is not a lack of free time, but rather

that we're spending the free time we already have badly. If you spend just a little of that time more actively and intelligently, you can add just a tremendous amount of new artistic material into your life, without taking on again the part-time job it was in college to go to all those shows and listen to all that college radio, and buy all those albums and read all those magazines and afford all those nights out and stay out so late each time. Ugh; leave all that stuff to the kids, I say, who just love all that stuff naturally anyway.

So with all this being true, of course the next thing I realized was that about once a month, I was going to have to devote a Sunday afternoon as well to simply cleaning out 20 to 40 songs on my Shuffle, to make room for the 20 to 40 new songs I would be adding over the next thirty days. And this taught me a second really important thing by taking on the Challenge, which is exactly how much as Americans we've been subconsciously trained now to be unthinking consumers within an all-pervasive consumerist society, of how we've been so thoroughly trained to just keep taking in more and more and more and yet MORE crap all the time, not really even paying that much attention anymore to what we already have but instead obsessed with what we don't. Because if I haven't pointed it out yet, 125 songs works out neatly to around twelve CDs worth of music; and that's exactly how many CDs used to fit in my old disc caddy, back when I was running around with a portable CD player instead of an iPod, and had to physically carry around whatever music I was going to listen to that day. That's one of the big decisions I made when first getting my Shuffle, which felt really odd at the time precisely because it went against conventional consumerist wisdom so much; that I don't need an iPod that holds 50 CDs, 100 CDs, 250 CDs, damnit, I simply don't. For years and years, whenever I was out on most daily errands, I had a selection of twelve CDs at any given moment, which served me just fine; and that will still serve me just fine, damnit, especially considering that they're now not even grouped by album, but literally 125 different singles if I want them to be.

Having such a small hard drive while downloading so many new songs simply forces me every month to pay very close attention to what's going on and coming off my device, which finally broke me of the bad habit that so many other Americans have too, to just gorge on entire CDs without thinking of it and then dump the entire thing on one's iPod, overpaying for the couple of songs you actually wanted and creating an entire wasteland of semi-crappy songs on your device's playlist, simply so you can keep filling that unnecessarily massive 60-gig hard drive and stop feeling guilty over buying something that unnecessarily massive to begin with. As this economic meltdown has sadly proven all too well this autumn and winter, the entire thing I'm talking about is a vicious cycle, a massive shell game of buying and selling that kept our economy artificially inflated for so long, but is now starting to all fall apart; it's a cycle you can break, but only by standing up against it more and more, by saying, "No, I don't need a 60-gig music player, I don't need 400 cable television channels, I don't need 1,200 satellite radio stations. I shouldn't have to pay sixteen bucks for three decent songs and nine pieces of filler. I shouldn't have to pay ten bucks to see a movie in the theatre, then another four bucks to see it on pay-per-view, then another twenty bucks on basic DVD, then another forty bucks for a deluxe DVD, then another fifty bucks for the Blu-ray disc. THAT'S IT. NO MORE. And no more buying the deceptively cheap devices with massive hard drives that encourage such a lifestyle, inexpensive precisely because they so profoundly encourage the mindless accumulation of the expensive albums

and movies and boxed sets to fill those massive hard drives.”

And so all this has also woken up my inner college-radio DJ (which I actually was for four years, back at KCOU at the University of Missouri at Columbia), which has me among other things now doing a monthly college-radio-style show through the CCLaP Podcast, where I present around a dozen of these bands to you each month, cut together professionally and with DJ banter from me regarding each musician. I’ll be the first to admit, I absolutely loved being a DJ back in school, and even had a few semesters in there where I took only one token class just so I could stay academically eligible for my radio show. It was something we talked about incessantly back then, of how cool it’d be to have some sort of professional set-up like the station but at home, or put together collectively piece by piece in the back of a record store, in order to run your own unlicensed signal out to a public audience; because that was the crucial element that made the idea so much fun, not just the ability to make mix tapes for friends, but to actually announce songs and send it out to a random public audience who listened to it in real time, whether you knew about them or not.

I’m astounded that the rise of free radio singles with podcasting technology has given way to the exact situation my friends and I used to salivate over, of being able to do a college-radio show without needing the college radio station, for either the broadcasting technology or the rich library of available songs, and I for one love being able to take advantage of it; and that has me spending a Sunday afternoon once a month not just grudgingly going through old music and tossing some of it off my iPod, but also looking up bands’ discographies and histories online, listening to their other songs, checking out bootleg videos from live shows, seeing which TV shows and commercials have used their music. It essentially turns the entire thing from work into play for me, yet another realization about the Challenge I made this year; that by doing all this stuff, I’m no longer just a passive music listener, but now an active DJ and music programmer myself, albeit an amateur one with just a few hundred listeners. That’s exactly enough listeners for me to take it seriously, to have a lot of fun with it and feel that there really are complete strangers out there enjoying it too, to make me an intelligent and educated music fan to begin with, to accept compliments and requests; or in other words, exactly the reasons to love being a college-radio DJ.

And that of course leads us to the next big realization I made about the Challenge; that by utilizing the method I do for collecting new music, it’s turned my little Shuffle not just into a storehouse for a bunch of CDs, but literally the same lineup of singles you’d hear on a typical adult-alternative-contemporary radio station, even played in the same kind of semi-random order. And in fact, just looking at the lineup of music on my iPod on a random day like today is good proof of what I’m talking about; for example, I have a rule not to delete any music off my Shuffle until it’s at least three months old, because you know how some songs only sneak up on you after multiple listenings, which is why a whopping 70 out of the 110 singles currently on my iPod have all been released within the last quarter-year (25 in December, 20 in November, 25 in October). This essentially leaves me with 40 songs from the other nine months of the last year, ones that have stuck around literally because I liked them the most; and if my hard drive were just a little bigger, you could add 30 or 40 random old songs from my library as well, and have literally the same exact lineup of 150 or so songs making up the “rotation” of an adult contemporary radio station at any given moment. And since I can set my Shuffle to random-play mode, it’ll even serve up these songs in a different order every time I listen, just like a real radio

station. And with me adding and deleting new songs literally every week, again just like a real radio station.

That I think is perhaps the most astonishing realization of all about the Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge, that this technology combined with a bit of personal effort can let me skip right over the usual middleman gatekeepers we used to need, people like radio programmers and rock critics; instead, these blogs and podcasts I follow are more like guides and peers, more like friends gently whispering to me, "Hey, check out this cool stuff I've recently been coming across." Just like in college, I have an active say over what specific artistic material is coming into my life at any given moment, and with me able to create a situation where I'm limiting this to just the most intelligent, unusual stuff out there; but unlike college, I'm not having to find all these artists from scratch, but rather have my "cloud of experts" providing me at first a narrowed yet still massive field of better-than-average material to choose from. By doing so, I'm essentially creating my own radio station (or newspaper, or art gallery, or literary magazine), and have no need anymore for the traditional radio stations and newspapers and art galleries and lit magazines that used to provide them.

That's ultimately why I thought it'd be interesting to track the off-subject Indie-Rock Challenge here at the website, because it's this kind of stuff I'm trying to do with CCLaP as well, only in that case regarding the subjects of literature and photography. Like these music blogs and podcasts, I hope for CCLaP to be a gentle guide to the underground arts, an opinion you add to a whole swarm of unrelated experts online you like and respect, to create a massive "cloud" of extra-good artists that you in particular then choose from for your own particular life. And just in case you're tempted to argue that this leads to lessened sales, that the emphasis on collecting free work released under liberal licenses is somehow going to cause the death of the arts as a profession, let's also note that I actually <I>purchased</I> a total of seven full CDs in 2008 as well, or over one every other month, including...

The New Pornographers, *Challengers*
Kaki King, *Dreaming of Revenge*
Stereolab, *Chemical Chords*
Ken Kase, *Five Songs About Chicago*
Bebel Gilberto, *Memento*
Laura Viers, *Saltbreakers*
Twin Cities Electropunk, Volume 4

Let's not ever overlook this, that this was a big reason I came up with the Great iPod Indie-Rock Challenge to begin with; because this is seven CDs more than I purchased in 2004, 2005 and 2006 *combined*, sucker. And in fact this fairly profoundly proves what all those advocates of Creative Commons and liberal licenses are always arguing: that those who download a lot of music, even steal a lot of music, are also the ones who buy the majority of music, that it's all either one or the other with a person, that they either heavily support that form of the arts in all kinds of different ways or they don't. These advocates claim that when record labels sue music pirates, they're actually antagonizing and alienating their most loyal, highest-spending customers; and based on the factual, indisputable details of my own Indie-Rock Challenge, this does indeed seem to be the case, with me not having a single year recently in my life where I actually wanted to buy seven brand-new CDs, until it was the same year I downloaded 14 others illegally, and another 21 CDs' worth of music with the bands' permissions.

Anyway, needless to say that I *highly* consider the Challenge to be an overwhelming success, now that it's officially over, and that I fully plan on keeping up such a schedule, and continuing to do the monthly music specials I have grown to love producing so much. And needless to say, I highly encourage you as well to take on such a similar Indie-Rock Challenge, or to maybe make it a poetry-reading challenge or film-festival one, or live-theatre challenge or dance-recital one. As my own adventures this year have hopefully proven, one can have a fantastic time in this modern age being not only a passive fan of such material, but also a semi-pro editor/curator and amateur expert, with it now possible to fulfill all your pirate broadcasting or publishing dreams right from home now with just a minimum of consumer-level equipment. And finally, should I end in proper snotty indie-rock style with my own best-of list for 2008? Remember of course that my music decisions are completely divorced from the real world where these songs exist; I never listen to the radio, rarely watch the television shows that feature these songs on their soundtracks, rarely go to the clubs where these bands tour. But if you take all 250 of the non-CD songs I've collected this year, and sort them by how many times I've listened to them, you get this list of 40 musicians, the 20 most popular from the first half of the year and the 20 from the second half, mixed back together alphabetically:

Afete Iku
 Amahla
 Beckers and D-Nose
 Boat People
 Casxio
 Chandeliers
 Discokaine
 Matt Duke
 Earlimart
 Foals
 Guards of Metropolis
 Jeff Hanson
 Headlights
 The Heavy Circles
 Hibernate
 Horse Feathers
 Jamtech Foundation
 Johann Johannsson
 Kaki King
 KnowSleep
 Kos Sueno
 Los Campesinos!
 Simone Mencarelli
 Jeremy Messersmith
 Mexican Institute of Sound
 Mocha Lab
 MSTRKRFT
 The OaKs
 Operon
 Pacifika
 Rampage
 Sandrine
 Pablo Sciuto
 She and Him
 Sukshinder Shinda
 Sia
 The Sight Below
 Skallander

Syntronics
The Tings Tings

How does this compare to other 2008 best-of lists? I don't know; literally, I haven't read any of those other lists. If anyone would like to make any comparisons, seriously, I'd love for you to mention the results in the comments. In any case, this is yet one more way you can judge in objective terms exactly how my one-year experiment in getting involved again with the underground arts went; simply compare this to Pitchfork's best-of list this year, or Rolling Stone's, or the Gallup college chart, and see whether I ended up finding some "cool" bands according to them or not.

*Oh, and one more thing to briefly mention before finishing up this final report, yet something else I was astounded by -- of how an additional 17 songs in my life this year, apart from the 500 just mentioned, came specifically from that Starbucks/iTunes cross-promotional campaign that happened all during 2008 as well, where every week they handed out millions of paper cards at their stores with codes for downloading a free song, around 40 titles over the course of a year when you subtract the weeks they offered videos instead. I was amazed by how many of these songs were ones I ended up really loving -- almost half, according to my device's statistics -- and thought it deserved at least a special mention here. It's a pity the partnership will likely be drying up in 2009; Starbucks is having massive financial troubles right now, and is hacking off the dead weight of cool expensive experimental promotional projects like a hot-air balloon that is minutes from crashing. Goodbye, viral marketing industry!

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