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FRIDAY, JAN 6, 2006 | VOLUME 34, NUMBER 15



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The Best Film of the Past Two Years

And 24 more picks from what the industry thought us yokels could handle in 2005

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

To choose the best movies of 2005 is to compromise. I limit my list of candidates to films that have screened in Chicago, but I could easily fill it with movies that haven't screened in the U.S. at all, and God knows what I've missed altogether. I'm at the mercy of studio heads, distributors, and publicists, whose decisions about what to release and when defy comprehension.

I saw Woody Allen's *Match Point* in Madrid in mid-November, believing the distributor's announcement that it would open in Chicago in December. Surprised at how much I liked it, I decided it probably belonged on my list, but then some industry executives decided that only the people in New York and Los Angeles should get to see it this year (in time for Oscar nominations), not the less discriminating moviegoers in the Chicago boon-docks. I also couldn't consider other films that won't open here until 2006, such as Tommy Lee Jones's *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*.

The people who run Disney spent a fortune sending critics and Academy members security-encoded DVDs with special "high end" players to view them on. Once we register the players we can watch the five films we've received so far as often as we like, though each time we do, according to the instructions, "the SV300 inserts a powerful, completely invisible watermark. It stamps the content with your player's ID number, and the time and date of the recording. If the playback is copied illegally to videotape, recordable DVD, or



The World

onto the Internet, Cinea will be able to analyze the copy and identify the player, the time, and the date on which the copy was made." Unfortunately, these players aren't high-end enough to be region free, and the version of *Howl's Moving Castle* they sent me is the same old dubbed one I'd already reviewed. The Japanese original with English subtitles won't be out commercially on DVD until March. I can't consider that version here because I haven't seen it, so I've grudgingly put the dubbed version on my list.

These complaints aside, 2005 was a good enough year

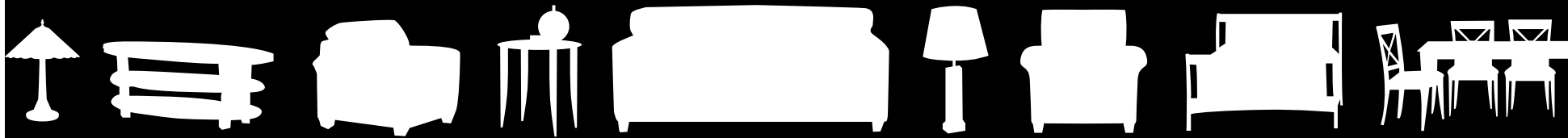
that my top ten list expanded to 15 including ties.

1. **The World.** Not just the best film of 2005, Jia Zhang-ke's feature was better, or at least more important, than my first choices for 2004 (*The Big Red One*) and 2003 (*25th Hour* and *Crimson Gold*). Those earlier masterpieces lack its vital and complex vision of what the whole planet is like at the moment.

Jia's greatest film, *Platform* (2002), is about the Cultural Revolution; *The World* is a superb companion piece about China's recent capitalist revolu-

tion, set in a theme park outside Beijing with scaled-down models of the world's most famous tourist attractions and populated by visitors and workers. It's a kitsch monstrosity that Jia makes endlessly fascinating and suggestive—in contrast to the cramped and unattractive "backstage" living spaces where the main characters spend most of their time when they're not working. The animated fantasies sparked by characters' text messages are often even more spacious and ethereal than the shots of the theme park. The play

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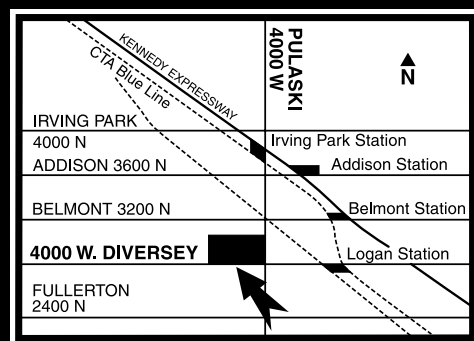
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Letters

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This Checks Out

Mike [Miner]:

I want to attempt to set the record straight and end all the nonsense of posters, plaques, and reminiscences about who coined the advice to young reporters "If your mother says she loves you, check it out" [Hot Type, December 9]. City News Bureau legend A.A. Dornfeld, better known as Dorny, is continually credited with the dictate. However, in his book *Behind the Front Page*, the curmudgeon night CNB boss, who tossed compliments around like sewer covers, disabused Mike Royko of the thought and insisted Ed Eulenberg, a coconspirator rewrite and deskman, penned the memorable order. "Eulie" was one of the great CNB mentors until he went straight and took the cash offered by the *Daily News*.

James B. Strong, aka Stormy

CNB '55

Arlington Heights

Take a Year—Take Two!

Thanks for "A Year Without Journalism" [December 30] and its elitist response to the blogger and Internet advertising challenge, as if bloggers aren't journalists too. The same self-serving cries were heard from the monasteries when Gutenberg printed his Bible with movable type. And from the movie industry when television came along. But we're not going back to buggy whips. Sorry.

What the new citizen journalism means is that the prima

donnas of press journalism, with their snobby pecking order, airs, pretensions, and delusions of grandeur, are outward bound, and good riddance. They give lip service to the concepts of democracy, equality, honesty, and free communication, but when true equality of access comes along they favor the continuing stranglehold information bottleneck represented by their jobs and their billionaire owners.

Newspaper advertising can't compete? Well, isn't that too bad. Welcome to the 21st century, guys. Thought you'd never get here. Take a year off. Take two, they're small. Nobody will ever miss you.

Neil Elliott

Evanston

Dept. of Misapprehended Hyperbole

Dear editor,

I picked up the current issue and went straight to the comics section. Then I read something much funnier: Michael Lenehan's hate piece on the online community ["A Year Without Journalism," December 30].

While it is getting tiresome to hear print journalists bemoan the popularity of the Internet, it can be very amusing to see how little of it they understand. As a public service, I'm going to outline how some of this works in a business sense so that we can, perhaps, have a more informed discussion in future issues.

The bloggers Mr. Lenehan seems to hate so much are link aggregators—they collect links to information relevant to the topic of their blog's subject and present them to the audience. Often they have a quick summary of the piece and some commentary on the content, but they almost always contain



Craig is bent on making a better world. And now that he has done so for job seekers, apartment hunters, and sexual predators, he's turning to journalism. He's involved in an online project that will use the same "wisdom of the masses" approach that informs Craigslist. —Michael Lenehan, December 30

a link. This is sometimes referred to as an "infomediary" or even "disinfomediary," but the general idea is that you have someone or something that finds and filters information to give you a "best of" list of information and links.

Bloggers help people find articles. And then they link to those articles. Do you know what that makes bloggers, Mr. Lenehan? That makes them FREE ADVERTISING for the publications putting those articles online.

Of course, this puts the onus of generating revenue on the publications that put their material online. Let's take the *Chicago Tribune*, for example. CPM (cost per 1,000 impressions) for banners ads on the *Tribune's* Web site ranges from \$12 to \$33, based on how specific you are on where you want your ad to appear (per the *Trib's* advertising media kit).

So let's say the Wonkette, one of the Web sites with hate piled upon it in the article, ran some commentary and a link to an article in the *Tribune*. I don't have any hard data on how many visits a link from Wonkette would generate, so let's say 1,000 people left the site to visit this *Tribune* article. (I suspect that number is low.) On the low end of things, that would represent \$12 of ad revenue for the *Tribune*. On the high end, \$33. Free money, generated because Wonkette linked to a *Tribune* piece. But wait, the *Trib* usually has two ads on a page, so we're talking more like \$20-\$50 of free money because one of those darn bloggers was talking about a *Tribune* article. More if some of these people decide to look at something else at the *Tribune's* Web site. (The technical jargon for people sticking around a site and looking at something else is "stickiness," FYI.)

So bloggers are hurting the papers? Not nearly as drastically as some would have us believe. On the other hand, I have been passing around the PDF link for the *Reader's* special

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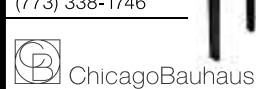
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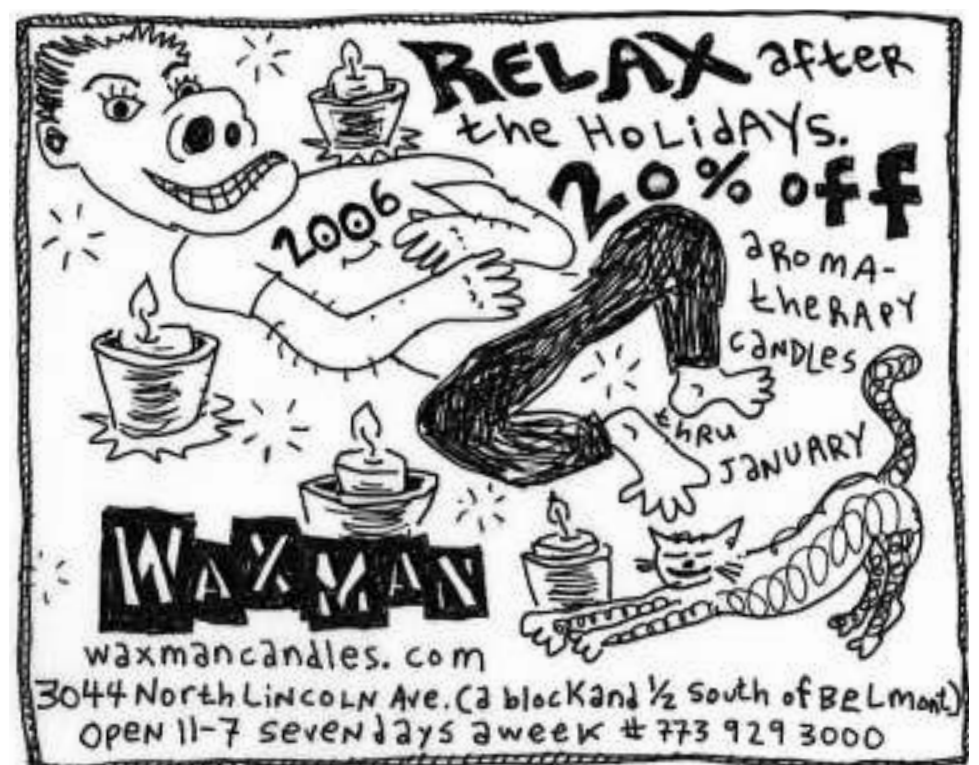
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Another “Good War”

The *Trib* questions the war it championed—and comes out with its faith intact.

By Michael Miner

A gag Christmas gift came to my house, a “count-down clock” key chain labeled “Backwards Bush.” As I write there are 1,114 days, 8 hours, 27 minutes, and—let’s see—20.9 seconds left in his second term. That’s an eternity if you don’t like Bush.

On November 20 the *Tribune* editorial page issued a challenge to the kind of readers who take comfort in Backwards Bush key chains. It dared them to see if they could handle the truth about the number one count in their indictment. Over the next several weeks, said the *Tribune*, it intended to take a long, hard look at the origins of the war in Iraq. “Did George W. Bush intentionally mislead this nation and its allies into war?” it asked. “Or is it his critics who have misled Americans, recasting history to discredit the president and his policies?”

In 2003 the *Tribune* editorial page had championed Bush’s war; would it now find against Bush and therefore against itself? That didn’t seem likely—especially given the polarized set of alternatives it offered, which ruled out the possibility of honorable misjudgment. Surely the *Tribune* would never admit to being deceived.

The November 20 editorial

went on to say, “This re-examination of the administration’s rationale for war offers doses of discomfort for the self-assured—those who have unquestioningly supported, or opposed, the ongoing war in Iraq.” But no one could doubt who’d wind up being told to swallow the larger “doses of discomfort.”

I’m guessing most Bush bashers who read the *Tribune* editorials, which concluded on December 28, judged them a shameless apologia for the president. Given the language that launched them, I found them surprisingly balanced.

Try to remember the state of the nation three years ago. Most Americans supported the looming invasion of Iraq because Bush said it was the right thing to do; others thought the idea was reprehensible, many simply because the idea was Bush’s. But some Americans with no love for the president believed the war might accomplish something useful. The troubling questions in their minds—our minds, because I was one—were these: Could a war be justified that seemed not absolutely necessary and that Bush (less so Tony Blair) flogged by playing to our fears? Was this the right war at the wrong time—when bin

Laden should be the quarry, not Hussein? And if going to war was the thing to do, could we trust this war to Bush, who touted it as if unaware that war is chaotic and evil?

The *Tribune* signed on with its eyes wide open. “The gauzy vision that proponents of war offer for a post-Hussein Iraq is, to be frank, unconvincing,” it allowed in its March 2, 2003, editorial “The case for war.” But the United Nations and Europe had waltzed with Hussein since the 1991 gulf war, enabling his “12 years of cunning defiance,” and in the *Tribune*’s view he’d become too dangerous to put up with any longer.

The “core issue” was clear: “Saddam Hussein must disarm,” and he hadn’t. “Despite 17 UN directives, Hussein has refused to account for his stores of deadly biological and chemical weapons, or to come clean about his nuclear aspirations.” While the world chose “to kick the can down the road and hope nothing bad happens,” a “thug” remained free to butcher his own people, intimidate his neighbors, and “mock the rest of the world.”

The *Tribune*’s recent editorials did no philosophizing on just and unjust wars. They declined to wonder what else we might



Given the prospect of Hussein selling WMDs to terrorists, the *Tribune* forgave Bush for erring on the side of belligerence.

have done to make America safer with the time, blood, and treasure expended in Iraq. The *Tribune* simply compared what Bush and his people said then to the facts as we know them now.

I’ll quote mainly from the December 28 editorial, which summarized the series. Much of what the White House said before the war about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction turned out to be “flat-out wrong,” the *Tribune* said. “In putting so much emphasis on illicit weaponry, the White House advanced its most provocative, least verifiable case for war when others would have sufficed.” As for Saddam Hussein’s links to Al Qaeda, “No compelling evidence ties Iraq to Sept. 11, 2001, as the White House implied. . . . By stripping

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section two

The Straight Dope® by Cecil Adams

It's a staple of ghost stories, horror films, spooky TV shows, and creepy books. And I suppose for someone with a heart condition, it may well be true. But can a young, healthy person be literally scared to death, without any physical cause? —Rebecca S., Seattle

its rhetoric of the ambiguity present in the intel data, the White House exaggerated this argument for war." And as for Iraq as a sponsor of terrorism generally, "The argument that Hussein was able to foment global terror against this country and its interests was exaggerated." What American intelligence surmised and the Bush administration believed, the *Tribune* said in its December 7 editorial on Iraq and terrorism, surpassed the "less bombastic facts on the ground." But given the prospect of Hussein selling WMDs to terrorists, the *Tribune* forgave Bush for erring on the side of belligerence.

If you believe the only justification for war is self-defense, you probably believe that if Bush was wrong about WMDs and state-sponsored terrorism his case for invading Iraq falls apart. If so, the only remaining question for the *Tribune* to answer was whether the Bush administration intentionally misled us or—to consider a possibility the *Tribune* didn't allow for when it introduced its series—was itself misled by Hussein's intransigence and its own faulty intelligence. The latter, the *Tribune* believes. The *Tribune* managed to conclude that the case for war still holds up, but it seemed sufficiently humbled by its look backward to drop the polarizing language about one side or the other deceiving the country. In its conclusion it spoke gently of "people of patriotism and integrity" who disagree.

So what were the *Tribune's* reasons for reaffirming Bush's war? It took a second look at that "gauzy vision" it dismissed three years ago. "The White House was correct in predicting that long subjugated Iraqis would embrace democracy," wrote the *Tribune* on December 28. "And while Kurds,

Sunnis and Shiites have major differences to reconcile, a year's worth of predictions that Sunni disaffection could doom self-rule have, so far, proven wrong."

These are sweet but clumsy thoughts. A robust election-day turnout doesn't mean the Iraqis have embraced democracy—it means they're eager to choose their next rulers with the tool at hand. When a government peacefully voted in is peacefully voted out we might be able to say that democracy has taken hold. As for the idea that Sunni disaffection could doom self-rule—well of course it could. All we can say for now is that it hasn't doomed self-rule yet and maybe it never will.

Despite its flaws, I think the *Tribune* series showed the proud owners of Backwards Bush countdown clocks that there was a case for the war we're fighting, and it wasn't something so obviously stupid and mendacious and driven by oil that only fools and scoundrels believed it. The war did something good by booting Hussein and it might do more good yet.

Bush bashers should concede this. Perhaps it occurred to some of them during the *Tribune's* six-week-long project that the paper was testing the purity of water long since over the dam. When I'd finished it I thought, "Good. Now let's move on. Let's debate the war the way it needs to be debated—on how it's been run." From inadequate troop levels to the lack of armor on troop carriers to the brutalizing of prisoners and sacking of independent-minded generals to the shrug that "stuff happens" when liberation gave way to anarchy, the White House has plenty to answer for. The public wants to end this war, but it doesn't want

continued on page 6

For once fiction writers and doctors agree: it's possible to die of fright, or for that matter grief, anger, joy, or just about any other intense emotion. Most victims are older and likely in precarious health to start with, but a few are young—in some cases really young. One British kid, in what is surely a mother's worst nightmare, was reportedly so freaked out by a visit to the dentist in 1970 that she died of a heart attack at age four.

Sudden death due to stress has been reported throughout history. Physician George Engel, in a 1971 review in *Annals of Internal Medicine*, notes that in the New Testament the apostle Peter tells Ananias, "You have lied not to man but to God," whereupon Ananias and later his wife Sapphira fall down dead. For more recent instances Engel over a six-year period compiled press accounts of 170 deaths due to "disrupting life events." Three-fifths involved men, commonly 45 to 55 years old; the peak age for women was 70 to 75. In 27 percent of cases, the largest category, the precipitating event involved fear. Examples: "A 63-year-old security guard died after being bound by robbers.... A woman seeing some teenagers outside her apartment beating and robbing a bus driver died while phoning the police.... A 35-year-old man accused of robbery told his lawyer, 'I'm scared to death!'; then collapsed and died."

As the above may suggest, most of Engel's cases aren't that startling. In fact, the most dramatic story I could come up with after hours of rooting around in the journals involved a hated assistant at a college whom the students pretended to execute: "The assistant was held with his head on the chopping block, eyes bandaged, while one student made the noise of a swinging axe [and] another dropped a warm, wet cloth on his neck. The assistant died instantly."

Yow. But the lack of detail smells to me of urban legend, and others have reached the same conclusion. The typical victim per Engel is a middle-aged male who undergoes a mildly traumatic event and dies within an hour. Not to be callous, but so what? Sudden cardiac death (fatal heart



SLUG SIGNORINO

attack, essentially) is common—roughly 450,000 cases per year in the U.S. excluding deaths in hospitals. Eighty-five to ninety percent of the time the victim has heart disease. Sure, in cases linked to an emotional jolt, maybe stress was a factor; still, the guy usually had problems to start with and at most was pushed over the edge.

The same can often be said about younger people who die suddenly of non-cardiac causes. Engel tells of a 17-year-old boy who collapsed and died at 6 AM, June 4, 1970; exactly one year previously, at 5:12 AM, June 4, 1969, his older brother had died of car-crash injuries. Coincidence or something more? Who knows? Fact is, the kid was done in by hemorrhage following a ruptured aneurysm, a condition arising from birth defect, injury, etc, not fraternal grief. The demise of the four-year-old dental patient is harder to explain, but she'd been sedated to calm her, and anesthesia of the young is inherently risky.

The most interesting scared-to-death cases are what we might call willed deaths. The classic scenario was described by physiologist Walter Cannon in a famous 1942 paper titled "'Voodoo' Death": the victim learns he's eaten taboo food or gets hexed

by a sorcerer, panics, and dies of no obvious organic cause. Many such accounts are hearsay, but clinician Clifton Meador reported two well-documented cases in 1992. In the first, a 60-year-old man was brought to the hospital near death after being cursed by a voodoo priest. The attending physician staged a "cure" in which, through sleight of hand, the victim was persuaded he'd vomited up a live lizard, the embodiment of the curse. He soon recovered and lived ten more years.

OK, this mope's real problem was that, pre-"cure," he was sure he was a goner, stopped eating, and was wasting away from starvation. Case number two resists such easy analysis. Here the patient was a man in his 70s who'd been diagnosed with incurable cancer and told he had only a few months left. Wanting to live till Christmas, he ate and exercised as directed and walked out of the hospital for the holidays much improved. He was readmitted shortly after New Year's close to death and expired within 24 hours. An autopsy found the cancer diagnosis had been exaggerated; his physical complaints weren't enough to kill him. Instead, he and everyone else were convinced he was going to die, so he did.

Comments, questions? Take it up with Cecil on the Straight Dope Message Board, www.straightdope.com, or write him at the Chicago Reader, 11 E. Illinois, Chicago 60611. Cecil's most recent compendium of knowledge, *Triumph of the Straight Dope*, is available at bookstores everywhere.

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Hot Type

continued from page 5

to lose it. It doesn't think we can afford to.

One of the curious aspects of the *Tribune* series was the occasional dissonance between stories in the same editions. For instance, the November 20 kick-off installment that foreshadowed a verdict favoring the White House shared the paper with a page-one story that began: "The German intelligence officials responsible for one of the most important informants on Saddam Hussein's suspected weapons of mass destruction say the Bush administration and the CIA exaggerated his claims in



the run-up to the Iraq war." On November 30 the editorial page allowed that Bush had



relied on faulty intelligence but argued, "Assertions that the Bush administration strong-armed

intelligence analysts in 2002 and 2003, or misled the nation in making its nuclear case for war, challenge logic." Page three that day offered a story with the headline "U.S. military paying Iraqi editors to publish propaganda." On December 4 the *Tribune* pondered the paradox of preemption. Because we got Hussein before he got us, "no one knows, and no one can know, what an undisturbed Iraq would have done in subsequent years." On the next page, op-ed columnist Steve Chapman, the *Tribune's* most acerbic in-house war critic, offered a more biting paradox of his own: "If the

enemy's main goal is to kill Americans, turning the war over to Iraqi forces won't solve the problem. On the contrary, it will leave the insurgents no choice but to come after us right here at home."

Chapman went on, "Bush prefers not to admit that the only reason Iraq is a terrorist hotbed is that we invaded and fostered chaos."

I doubt that mischievous editors were seeing to it that reality undermined *Tribune* opinion. But they did make it harder to read the case for war without wondering how much it matters anymore. **B**

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Tale of a Ticket

A Roscoe Village businessman thinks someone is making him pay for being a pest.

By Ben Joravsky

Two days after Christmas, Christopher DeCaigny went to court to challenge a ticket he'd been issued for breaking the city's garbage-collection law. But DeCaigny insists his real offense is one that's not mentioned in the city code—messing with the wrong guy.

DeCaigny thinks the city's punishing him for challenging Al Johnson, president of the Roscoe Village chamber of commerce and a longtime ally of Ted Matlak, alderman of the 32nd Ward. "It's a real squirrely deal," says DeCaigny, president of Union Insurance Group, at 2123 W. Roscoe. "It's gotten out of control."

For the last 30 years or so, Johnson, who runs a real estate company, has been the unofficial mayor of Roscoe Village. He's been president of the chamber of commerce since the early 90s. DeCaigny's beef with Johnson goes back to 2004, when the chamber championed a proposal to create a Special Service Area. An SSA levies a special tax on a district for a ten-year period to raise money for specific services. In this case, the Roscoe Village chamber of commerce proposed raising about \$300,000 a year with an SSA to be used to erect and tend planters, shovel sidewalks, run a shuttle bus, and pay for other programs intended to boost business in the stores near Roscoe and Damen. But in November 2004, after more than 100 locals attended a meeting and denounced the plan,

Matlak dropped his support and the proposal was killed.

Upset at the chamber for trying to raise taxes, DeCaigny and other business owners charged the organization with having violated its bylaws: though board terms were supposed to run two years, board elections hadn't been held since 1999. Johnson says this hardly seemed like a big deal: few people, he says, have showed much interest in attending the chamber's meetings, much less serving on the board. The bylaws have been amended to allow the current board to continue to serve.

The bickering between DeCaigny and Johnson continued throughout the year into the summer. In June the dispute got testier. DeCaigny says he was eating at Piazza Bella Trattoria, a restaurant on Roscoe, with Brad Spiess, the vice president of his insurance company, and a few others. "We were talking and an employee of the restaurant came up and said, 'Chris, the police are here looking for you,'" says Spiess. "Sure enough, we looked outside the window and a police department car was out there."

DeCaigny says he went outside to talk to the police officer. "He said, 'We have a report that you assaulted Al Johnson,'" says DeCaigny. "I was flabbergasted. Assaulted him? I hadn't seen him in days. The cop said somebody pushed Al Johnson down. I said, 'Let me see the report.' He said, 'I don't have a written report—he called it in.' (Johnson

Upset at the chamber for trying to raise taxes, DeCaigny and other business owners charged the organization with having violated its bylaws: though board terms were supposed to run two years, elections hadn't been held since 1999.

denies reporting DeCaigny as his assailant.) I said, 'This is ridiculous. I'll call my attorney and you guys come back with an official statement and we'll deal with it then.' He said something like, 'Yeah—it's BS.' You could tell his heart wasn't in it. That's the last I heard from the cops."

After the policeman drove off, DeCaigny went back inside the restaurant. About 15 minutes later Andrew Szorc, the 32nd Ward superintendent and a longtime Matlak precinct captain, came in. "Drew walks in and says, 'Chris, you've got to back off,'" says DeCaigny. "I couldn't believe it. The cops, the alderman's guy—what's next? I admit I got upset. I was furious. I was absolutely livid. I said, 'You sit your fat ass down and tell Al Johnson to back off.'"

As the exchange heated up, DeCaigny says, Szorc referred to Matlak's biggest local rival, state representative John Fritchey. "Drew said, 'You're helping John Fritchey run against Matlak,'" says DeCaigny. "I can't believe that's how they saw it. I'm raising important questions about our chamber of commerce, and they think I'm doing this to score points for Fritchey? I said, 'What the hell are you talking about? I don't even know Fritchey. He's the state rep. Why would he want to be alderman—isn't that a step down?'" (Szorc refused to comment on the incident. "I am fair and just to everybody," he says. "I have nothing to do with the chamber.")

According to Spiess, it was a nasty scene. "Let's put it this way—they had an animated conversation that basically cleared out the restaurant," he says. "It was a tense and loud exchange." (Spiess says he has a list of witnesses who can corroborate this, but when I asked for their names he didn't call me back.)

On September 30 DeCaigny wrote a letter to the office of attorney general Lisa Madigan, asking for an investigation into the bylaws of the Roscoe Village chamber of commerce, charging that they violate the Illinois Not-for-Profit Act. (Johnson insists that the bylaws have already been cleared by the attorney general's office.) He also asked the attorney general to "place a freeze on all property and assets of the Chamber" pending "an election of a new [chamber] board" and a "full audit" of its books.

Over three weeks passed, and he still hadn't heard back from Madigan's office. So he wrote a letter to Fritchey, asking him to "facilitate an audience with the Attorney General's office." In November *Inside*, the neighborhood weekly, ran an article on the matter, quoting DeCaigny, referring to his letter to Madigan's office, and noting that Fritchey was "scheduling a meeting with the attorney general's office to keep abreast of the investigation." The next day DeCaigny got his garbage ticket.

DeCaigny runs his insurance company out of four units he

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owns in a condo complex on Roscoe. Like the residents in his building, he gets weekly service from Streets and Sanitation trucks (supervised by Szorc, by the way), which collect his garbage from several bins in his alley. But businesses aren't entitled to weekly garbage collection. Instead they're supposed to pay for private service.

DeCaigny says the city is arbitrarily enforcing this law in Roscoe Village. He points out that several other local businesses have regular city garbage service—including Johnson's real estate company. He also finds the timing of the ticket suspicious. "For [12] years we've been using

the city's garbage service," he says. "Then on November 9, right after the *Inside* runs its story, the city discovers we have the wrong kind of service? I think the timing's a little more than a coincidence."

DeCaigny says he's starting to get a little paranoid. To him the message is clear. "They wanted me to back off, but I'm not backing off," he says. "We've been asked by a lot of businessmen to continue the fight."

If it is retribution, it's not very efficient. Streets and San tickets are delivered through the mail. But the inspector who wrote up Union Insurance used the wrong zip code, so the ticket took over a

month to arrive.

Matlak says he has nothing against DeCaigny and knows nothing about Szorc's show-down with him at the restaurant in July. "It's a personal dispute between DeCaigny and Al Johnson," he says. "Whatever dispute he has with the chamber has nothing to do with me. I don't even know what DeCaigny looks like." Matlak also says he knows nothing about the ticket. "Until you called me, I didn't even know they issued a ticket," he says. "It's about a garbage cart. This is city policy, and they've been enforcing it in the ward."

Does this mean that Streets

and Sanitation will eventually ticket Johnson's office? "I don't have anything to do with that," says Matlak.

Johnson says DeCaigny's allegations of harassment are "preposterous." "I've been in this neighborhood for 40 some years," he says. "This is the first I've ever heard of anything like this." He confirms that his garbage service is provided by the city. "I've been here since 1988," he says. "I've had the same service since 1988."


DeCaigny was out of town on December 27. But Spiess and James Clune, Union Insurance's lawyer, schlepped over for the 9 AM hearing in the city's adminis-

trative hearing office in the shopping strip across the street from Lane Tech High School. The hearing officer was late, so they waited in the hallway for about 30 minutes. Then they were ushered into a windowless room where the hearing officer dismissed the ticket because it wasn't clear from handwriting on it what date it had been issued.

Afterward Spiess and Clune stood in the parking lot. "If it was so important, you'd think they'd send someone down to enforce their ticket," Spiess said. "You know what was going on here. They were just inconveniencing us—sending us another message." ■

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Our Town

[snip] **All that glitters isn't green.** Fred Pearce writes in *New Scientist*, "The drive for 'green energy' in the developed world is having the perverse effect of encouraging the destruction of tropical rainforests. From the orangutan reserves of Borneo to the Brazilian Amazon, virgin

forest is being razed to grow palm oil and soybeans to fuel cars and power stations in Europe and North America." Surging prices and some governments' biofuel requirements are likely to accelerate the destruction. —Harold Henderson | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com

Up and Comers

Queen of All Media

Richard Bluestein may be Chicago's first podcasting star.

By Mike Seely

Bill Streeter wiped a stream of golden-brown grease from his chin as he pulled his maroon minivan out of a KFC parking lot in Bloomington and turned toward Chicago. He popped a cassette adapter attached to an iPod into his tape deck, and for the rest of his trip alternated between stored tunes and podcasts—downloadable radio programs he subscribes to via Real Simple Syndication (RSS), media aggregation software often referred to as "TiVo for the Web." Ninety miles south of town, he tuned in to one of his favorite shows: *Yeast Radio*, an hour-long daily podcast hosted by a gay Chicago-based performance artist named Richard Bluestein.

Streeter, creator of the rock 'n' roll culture Web site Lo-Fi Saint Louis, was headed for the Apple Store on Michigan Avenue to conduct a Saturday-night seminar on video blogging entitled "Meet the Vloggers." There, in the small theater at the back of the store, he finally met the 38-year-old Bluestein in person—though when he did he barely recognized him. That's because on his show—which also runs with different content as a video blog—Bluestein isn't Bluestein. He's Madge Weinstein, a 59-year-old "bloated Jewish lesbian" with a penchant for overeating, hard-left politics, flatulence jokes, and "yeast infection advocacy."

The self-proclaimed "shock jock with no cock," Madge is apt to refer to the vice president as "Penis Cheney" and secretary of state Condoleezza Rice as a "cunt-faced whore bull dyke bitch." She calls liposuction "thigh abortion" and makes promises to potential advertisers like "If you sponsor me, I'll lick your balls." Add F-bomb attacks on the U.S. military's use of white phosphorus in Iraq, comparisons of Enron executives to serial rapists, a flamboyant roster of out-and-proud guests, and vivid descriptions of the bloated host's gassy constitution and stool samples and you have some of Madge's more radio-friendly witticisms.

"I think *Yeast Radio* is a really good example of a content producer who's not for a broad audience," said Mason Dixon, a video production designer and copresenter at the "Meet the Vloggers" symposium. "But the people who are going to like it are gonna love it."

Streeter—a 38-year-old father, air force veteran, and son of a Baptist minister—doesn't necessarily fit into what one might assume is the niche demographic for a show with a cross-dressing, openly gay, politically radical host, but he's one of Madge's most loyal listeners. "Who wouldn't love her?" Streeter asks. "She's a complete original. I love the irrever-



Richard Bluestein as Madge Weinstein, host of *Yeast Radio*

ence of her comedy. Her sheer outrageousness takes the edge off the monotony of my day."

Bluestein launched *Yeast Radio* from his Chicago living room in November 2004 with little but a microphone, streaming audio software, and a well-conceived persona. A month later he sent a demo reel to former MTV VJ Adam Curry, host of the podcast *Daily Source Code* and founder of Podshow.com, a distribution network that's attempting to monetize home-brewed Internet broadcasts by attracting sponsors and, eventually, offering premium content. Curry was instantly smitten and soon added *Yeast Radio* to the Podshow roster. According to the network, the show has attracted more than 40,000 subscribers since it was picked up in early 2005; factoring in unique downloads and listeners to Podshow's channel on Sirius satellite radio—the same uncensored, pay-to-play network that's now home to Howard Stern—its audience may be more than double that size.

"From day one I was totally in love with his concept," says Curry, who estimates he gets a dozen submissions per day from aspiring producers. "Madge is really what Howard Stern wants to be."

In person Bluestein is reserved, perhaps owing to his square-peg adolescence in Carmel, Indiana, where his family moved from New Jersey he was in fourth grade. "It sucked," says Bluestein, whose father is a renowned thermodynamics professor. "There were few if any other Jewish students in my classes and people constantly made fun of my religion, my eastern accent, and my lack of interest in athletics. I was always an introspective child with few friends."

Bluestein, who has a degree in accounting from Indiana University,

moved to Chicago in 1992 after getting fired from his first postcollegiate job at an Evansville firm. After settling into his new city, he worked in the health-care industry and began dallying heavily with narcotics, which culminated in a brief stint living in Amsterdam in the late 90s.

"I sought out drugs," he says. "I remember in high school phys ed class when the drug expert came in and showed the poster of all the different pills that we shouldn't take if we were offered them. I just kept thinking, 'I want one of those, and that, and that!' So finally I got some pot and then I escaped. My drug problem lasted until I returned from Amsterdam, crashed and burned."

Bluestein returned to Chicago in 1998, but having quit drugs, "I had nothing to interest me," he says. "So I bought a video camera and some editing software. That's how my video hobby started." He began posting experimental clips on a Web site he'd started (and still maintains), *insanefilms.com*. Then, with few qualifications to speak of beyond his Web clips, Bluestein answered an ad in the *Reader* seeking a director of photography for Kristie Alshaibi's *Other People's Mirrors*, a way-off-mainstream production exploring adult taboos. Alshaibi was sufficiently impressed with the novice filmmaker to offer him the gig.

"Cannibalism, rape, murder, group sex—I don't remember all of them, but I had to film them all," recalls Bluestein. "We shot a rape scene in one of the tunnels under Lake Shore Drive. Somebody actually called the cops. And in the cannibalism scene, our female protagonist ate this guy's balls. That was my introduction to filmmaking."

Once production wrapped, Bluestein continued to produce multimedia content for *insanefilms.com* and a separate Livejournal account,

incorporating video, audio, and heart-spilling text.

Emboldened by Alshaibi's envelope-pushing style, he also began performing in drag at Schubas with the Feast of Fools Cabaret, developing an alter ego that would crystallize on yet another film project.

"Some friends of mine were smoking pot and they called me and said they wanted to do a mockumentary like *Spinal Tap*, except with lesbian riot grrrls," says Bluestein. "They wanted me to play the manager of the band, this big Jewish woman who wants to fuck all the girls. So it just came out of that."

The film has yet to be released, but the band manager character gradually evolved into Bluestein's preferred online persona. "I had a lot of problems in my personal life from spilling all this shit on the Internet," he says. "It damaged some relationships and it became very difficult to be truthful. And when I wasn't truthful, I'd just become depressed. The Madge thing is perfect, because I can fictionalize my life."

Bluestein's contract with Podshow, from which he draws a full-time salary (neither he nor Podshow would disclose the specifics), includes a production deal that will allow him to develop new characters down the road. "I plan to have my own half-hour counterversion of Wolf Blitzer's *The Situation Room* on a channel like Comedy Central," he says. "I'd call it 'The Shituation Room.' It'll make *The Daily Show* look like Fox News." Bluestein is also currently developing *qpodder.com*, an online community for queer podcasters.

But despite *Yeast Radio*'s early success, Bluestein is still looking for a
continued on page 12

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Our Town

[snip] **Land of shrinking opportunity.** Two of the world's leading cancer geneticists, Neal Copeland and Nancy Jenkins, are leaving the National Cancer Institute because of Bush administration restrictions on stem-cell research. They were set

to go to Stanford, because California voters had approved \$3 billion for such research. But now that antiabortion groups have tied up the money in court, they're going to Singapore's Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology. Irving

Weissman, head of the Stanford lab, told the San Jose *Mercury News*, "When they do their work, it will be for Singapore. They'll conduct their clinical trials in Singapore. The first place their work will be patented and used will be Singapore." —HH

continued from page 10

cess in attracting an audience, its following hasn't resulted in the sort of sustained paid advertising Podshow is designed to generate: the film *House of Wax*, starring Paris Hilton, is the show's lone sponsor to date. Still, Curry remains undaunted. "We're willing to subsidize our hunch that Madge will be something very big," says Curry. "This is going to be a huge community that is very tight-knit, thanks in no small part to Richard Bluestein."

"I'm ready to take on the world," Bluestein says. "Howard Stern may call himself the 'King of All Media,' but I'm about to become the Empress of All Things Tech, Politic, Media, and Yeast. Honey, everything's coming up Weinstein!" ■



LAURA PARK

Follow the Money

A Million Here, a Million There . . .

The City Council's cut of the 2006 budget.

By Mick Dumke

A sense of good cheer pervaded the last City Council meeting before the holidays, on December 14, where the aldermen finished weeks of discussing Mayor Daley's 2006 city budget by making a few amendments and signing off on it 48 to 1. Fourth Ward alderman Toni Preckwinkle was the sole no vote; the 33rd Ward's Richard Mell was absent.

Some aldermen, led by the Ninth Ward's Anthony Beale, would still like to add another nickel to the budget's 20-cent hike in cigarette taxes to cover the salaries of an additional staff member for each ward. Beale says his office receives around 100,000 constituent phone calls each year. "The job of alderman has really evolved over the years," he says. "We now have e-mail and faxes. We haven't upgraded our staff and offices to keep up with the times." In the meantime they'll just have to get by with what they've been allotted. Here's how it breaks down.

- Total 2006 City Council budget,

- including salaries, supplies, research costs, meeting costs, and ward-office expenses: \$39,677,808
- Percent increase from 2005: 7.99
- Percent increase in the national consumer price index over the past year: 3.5
- 2006 salary for an alderman: \$98,125
- 2005 salary: \$94,805
- Percent increase: 3.5
- Percent increase in the council's budget since the first city budget Richard M. Daley introduced as mayor, in 1990: 71.6
- Percent increase in the consumer price index over the same period: 51.2
- 2006 salary for council members in New York City: \$90,000
- 2006 salary for council members in Houston: \$44,400
- 1990 aldermanic salary: \$40,000
- Value of 1990 aldermanic salary in 2005 dollars: \$60,474
- Number of pay hikes aldermen have given themselves since 1990: 6
- Number of aldermen who've refused pay increases since 2002: 2
- Salary taken by the two, Margaret Laurino of the 39th Ward and Eugene Schuler of the 47th Ward: \$85,000

The past 16 budgets have included funds to cover the salaries of 50 aldermen, 3 full-time staffers for each, 10 administrators and aides to serve the council as a whole, and up to 25 staffers for the council's finance

committee, which oversees bonds, taxes, legal settlements, workers' compensation, and council spending. But each of the council's 19 committees also has a budget for "personnel services," which committee chairmen use to hire more staff. Tom Allen, alderman of the 38th Ward and chairman of the committee on transportation and the public way, says the chairmen like having a lump sum for hiring because they need "flexibility."

- Number of salaried council staff, not counting aldermen, listed in the 2005 (and the 2006) budget: 184
- Number (not counting aldermen) listed in November 2005 payroll records: 290
- Number of salaried staff listed in 2006 for president pro tem Danny Solis, the alderman who presides over the council in the mayor's absence: 4
- Number for finance committee chairman Ed Burke: 27
- Number of council staffers who earn more than aldermen: 6
- 2006 salary of the highest-paid council staffer, finance committee chief administrative officer Marla Kaiden: \$148,452
- Top 2005 salary not itemized in 2005 budget, for chief administrative officer Charles Lomanto: \$106,572

Staff titles don't always explain what the people who hold them do.

Legislative aides for one alderman or committee may help research or even draft ordinances; other aides are essentially administrative or clerical assistants. (Most of them are paid under the "personnel services" line item.) One of the longest titles is assistant council committee secretary in charge of committee rooms. "They do a variety of different things for the entire City Council," says Schuler.

- Number of assistant council committee secretaries in charge of committee rooms in 2006: 2
- Salaries for assistant council committee secretaries in charge of committee rooms: \$57,036 and \$61,188
- Number of legislative aides listed in the 2005 (and the 2006) budget: 2
- Number of salaried legislative aides listed in payroll records in 2005: 87
- Top salary for legislative aides listed in payroll records in 2005: \$78,828

The responsibilities of and funding for the council's legislative committees, some of which have been consolidated, are also wide-ranging.

- Number of committees in 2006: 19
- Number in 1990: 27
- Percent increase in funding for committee staffing and expenses since 1990: 61
- 2006 budget for the finance committee, the council's biggest:

continued on page 14

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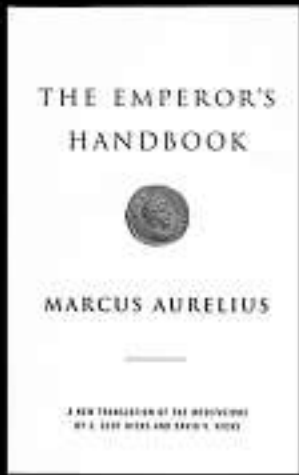
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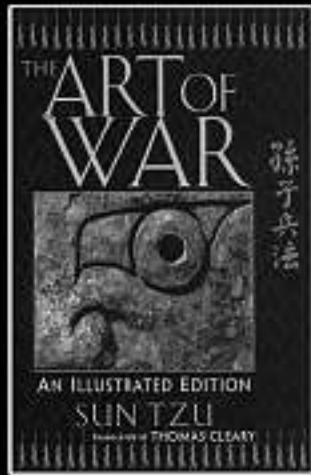
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Our Town

[snip] **A military historian's perspective.** Hebrew University's Martin van Creveld, author of *The Transformation of War*, writes at forward.com, "For misleading the American people, and launching the most foolish war since Emperor Augustus in 9 B.C. sent his legions into Germany and lost them, Bush deserves to be impeached and, once he has been removed from office, put on trial along with the rest of the president's men." —HH

continued from page 12

- \$2,060,463
- 2005 finance committee budget: \$1,927,084
- 2006 budget for the parks and recreation committee, the council's smallest: \$81,820
- 2005 parks and recreation budget: \$74,816
- 2006 health committee budget: \$84,816
- 2005 health committee budget: \$77,614
- 1990 health committee budget: \$100,800
- 1990 budget for the committee on ports, wharves, and bridges: \$60,220
- 2006 budget: 0 ("Was it around after we settled Fort Dearborn maybe?" says Alderman Allen, whose transportation committee has taken over this committee's responsibilities. He adds, "What the hell is a wharf?")

The council budget also includes several pots of money for things such as "legal, technical, medical and professional services, appraisals, consultants, printers, court reporters, and other incidental contractual services" (a total of \$3,206,042). As president pro tem, Solis can authorize dipping into one of them; the 50th Ward's Bernard Stone, who holds the largely symbolic post of vice mayor, can authorize dipping into another and Burke, as finance committee chair, into two others.

- 2006 contingency funds to be spent at the discretion of the president pro tem: \$4,000
 - 2006 contingency funds to be spent at the discretion of the vice mayor: \$104,970
 - 2006 contingency funds to be spent at the discretion of the finance committee chair: \$1,433,077
 - Total council funds directly controlled by Burke in 2006, including the finance committee budget and contingency funds: \$3,493,535
- There's also a pot of money to cover honorary ceremonies held at the beginning of council meetings.
- 2006 budget for "Expense in connection with recognition and awards to citizens of Chicago for acts of heroism": \$1,000



Alice Danhoffer recites the rosary at Rose Calvero's house; an ambassador wraps the Pilgrim Virgin for her next trip.



JOE DAVIS

Active Cultures

Driving Miss Mary

Keeping up a little-known Catholic tradition is getting harder.

By Jeffrey Felshman

For the past week the Pilgrim Virgin has stood on a table in the basement of the Cannones' bungalow on the western edge of the city, framed by an arc of tiny white

lights and flanked by candles and vases full of flowers. Now it's someone else's turn to have the statue for a week, and an honor guard from the Ambassadors of Mary has come to take it away.

The five women and one man who make up the honor guard are sitting around two tables with the Cannones and their friends. The Cannones, who've hosted the statue three times, seem to know the removal rite as well as the honor guard does: five decades of the rosary, followed by the Ritual of the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Act of Consecration of the Family to the Sacred Heart. Their voices hum. "Gratefully we adore you. . . . Stay

with us, for the night is coming on. . . . Sweet heart of Mary, be my salvation." They pray together for half an hour, then the Cannones add their own wrinkle to the ceremony, leading the group in singing "Viva Maria" and "E l'Ora Che Pia" in Italian.

Frank Cannone, who moved to the U.S. from Italy 42 years ago, says most of the people who've come each evening during the past week to say prayers and have cake and coffee are also older people from the old country. His children haven't come. "They're Catholic, but they go to work, they're busy," he says. "They have to drive an hour, an hour and a half to get here. Maybe next time." His wife has signed up to get the

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[snip] **Do you speak Microsoft?** According to Russell Mokhiber and Robert Weissman's "Focus on the Corporation" column, "Of the world's 100 largest economies, 47 are nations, and 53 are corporations." —HH

The founder
"thought it would
say something to
see men coming
into homes and
doing devotions,
where it's always
women. You can
get women to
do just about
anything when it
comes to church.
When it comes to
men it's difficult."

statue again the same time next year.

Anthony Ross, a 72-year-old wearing a blue blazer and a tie, is the official custodian of this Pilgrim Virgin, one of 28 circulating in the Chicago area and northern Indiana. He's responsible for picking the statue up and dropping it off in his territory, which is bounded by Austin, Grand, Mannheim, and Lawrence. He rarely leaves town and has transported the statue practically every Saturday since 1990.

He and other custodians, all volunteers, report to the president of the Ambassadors of Mary, Pat Hackett, at the group's storefront headquarters on Diversey near Austin. Hackett says the custodians are always men, because the statues are three feet tall and weigh 25 pounds and because the founder of the organization "thought it would say something to see men coming into homes and doing devotions, where it's always women. You can get women to do just about anything when it comes to church. When it comes to men it's difficult."

Father James Mary Keane, a Chicago priest, founded the Ambassadors of Mary in 1946 to promote devotion to Mary. After Pope Pius XII declared 1954 a "Marian year," he set up the Pilgrim Virgin program with a replica of a statue in Fatima, Portugal, where an apparition of Mary allegedly spoke to three children in 1917. The organization's Web site explains that "most people are unable to make a

pilgrimage to Fatima. Our Lady, with characteristic humility and love, overcomes this difficulty by reversing the process. She becomes the Pilgrim." It wasn't an original idea—replicas of the Fatima statue have been blessed and sent out into the world since 1947. But the Ambassadors of Mary happily sent statues to parishes that requested them, and Hackett says that today more than 300 are being moved from home to home throughout the world every Saturday. "Through her 'Pilgrim Statues,'" states the Web site, Mary "is hurrying around the world collecting prayers and sacrifices in reparation for the sins committed against her Divine Son."

For the first 30 years the statues were made at Del Prado Statuary on Grand Avenue, and after it went out of business they were made in Northlake. For the past seven years they've been made in Annandale, Virginia. This new model weighs only 15 pounds. The Pilgrim Virgin in the Cannones' basement is a 25-pounder made in Northlake in 1991. One of the Cannones' friends drapes the statue in a cloth and carries it outside, settling it in the lap of Bridget Griffin, who's sitting in the front seat of a blue Mercury. She fastens the seat belt around both herself and the statue, and the three-car caravan heads off to the house of the woman who gets it next.

Rose Calvero, an 84-year-old widow who lives in Schiller Park, has already had the Pilgrim Virgin three times this year. When Ross became custodian there was a two-year waiting list to get the statue. Now he often has to call "repeaters" such as Calvero and ask them to take it.

Ross pulls into Calvero's driveway behind the Mercury, takes the Pilgrim Virgin from Griffin, and carries it into the front room of the tidy bungalow. He places it on a platform below a rose-festooned arch, next to two large rose-filled vases and two small ones holding single roses.

Once everyone's seated Ross asks Calvero if she would like the group to say a special prayer. She says she has a 17-year-old grandson with cancer, adding, "He starts chemo again this week." They all pray for him, then start the rosary.

Afterward everyone heads into Calvero's kitchen for cake and coffee. Audrey Restivo, who's been part of the honor guard for 16 years, says her niece had the statue when her daughter was diagnosed with lupus and the girl is fine now. Alice

What Are You Wearing?



Aay Preston-Myint

Amassments

Aay Preston-Myint is a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He cofounded the Chicago Tapes Project, subject of an earlier Reader story, and teaches art to little kids.

Did you make the shirt you're wearing?

Yeah—over time I just start amassing fabric scraps I find. It's a collage. There's no real professional process. I just stick it all together and sew until it doesn't move anymore.

I know you've done a lot of screen printing and painting.

Well, there was the live-action screen printing, where I'd print T-shirts for people at galleries and parties. That was the bridge over into fabric- and fiber-oriented work.

What are you working on now?

I'm doing an all-purpose project about nuclear technology. Right now I'm making models of a plastic dining set where the table is a mushroom cloud and the chairs—like little stools—are nuclear reactors.... Also some soft-sculpture nuclear missiles.

Soft nuclear missiles?

There are 44 countries in the world that either can make a nuclear bomb or already have. I wanted to make a little plush toy bomb for each one of those. My friend and I came up with the idea last year.

How many have you made so far?

Only six: Argentina, Belgium, United States, South Africa, India, and Sweden. It's kind of tongue-in-cheek, like *Dr. Strangelove*, learning how to live with and love our failures. —Liz Armstrong

Danhoffer, who's been accompanying the statue for as long as Restivo, says most people don't request it for any special purpose. But, she says, "sometimes it seems that the statue goes to homes where it's most needed. I had it at my house one time where lightning struck my attic—it actually tarnished a vase of flowers while we were saying our prayers. Do you remember that, Carol?"

"Yeah, I do," says Carol Heidorn, nodding.

"Nothing happened," Danhoffer says. "It was like a miracle because she was there. It seems like when people have her they'll say, 'Oh, we really need her,' because this one is sick or that."

"This happened just in time, they'll say," says Ross.

"It does, it happens," says Restivo. "It's like she gives you strength before something may happen in your life."

Griffin says it's hard to give up the

statue. "You get it for a week, and when it leaves you feel sad."

"Oh yes! You feel so sad," say a couple people in unison.

"It's a special peace or something," says Danhoffer.

Calvero's 85th birthday is coming up in a few days, and Ross and the women sing "Happy Birthday."

Josephine Hargus, who's been an honor guard for ten years, has been sitting quietly during the discussion. Suddenly she says, "We all have a real devotion to the Blessed Mother."

"Oh yes," says Restivo. "She's a mother, and whenever you need something where do you go? You go to your mother. And that's it."

"They say he can't refuse his mother," Griffin says.

Restivo notes that Hargus recently lost her 49-year-old son to a heart attack. "She's getting solace from doing this," she says. "That's her strength."

Hargus smiles wanly. ☐

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Rosenbaum

continued from page 1

among all these spaces marks Jia as the most talented Asian director currently at work—with the possible exception of Hou Hsiao-hsien, whose hauntingly minimalist *Cafe Lumiere* will be playing at the Music Box in January.

2. Not on the Lips. At 35, Jia may be the youngest supreme film master working today. At 83, Alain Resnais is the second oldest working regularly, after 97-year-old Manoel de Oliveira, who visited Chicago for the first time during this year's film fest. This exquisite film version of a 1925 operetta is Resnais' fifth cinematic effort to convey his love of musicals, and in some ways it's his most successful. A weird, ghostly farce about loneliness and emotional fragility, it's also an anachronistic history lesson, with its 1920s manners, 1950s MGM colors and lighting, and early-21st-century French racism and anti-Americanism. It also displays much of the formal mastery of previous Resnais masterworks, including *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *Providence* (1977), and *Melo* (1986). Fox Lorber never bothered to advertise this film, but it's been available on DVD since March, when it also screened at the Gene Siskel Film Center.

3. A History of Violence. I've yet to encounter a single attack on David Cronenberg's multilayered yet fluid meditation on violence in George Bush's America—filmed entirely in Canada. The writer-director clearly knows what he's doing—note the brilliantly worked-out sex scenes—and though the film peaks well before its end, making the climax almost an afterthought, it's less a serious flaw than an indication of how lean and mean the earlier segments are.

4. Ten Skies. Here's an experimental film seen by many fewer people than the titles above, having screened only once at Chicago Filmmakers. This masterpiece by James Benning is an elaborately constructed montage of ten ten-minute takes, a mesmerizing study of time, light, movement, and moisture that traces the shifting relations between clouds and earth, nature and people. It had much more to say to me than most narrative films, though the subtly shifting patterns and textures of each shot provide plenty of narrative as they tell the story of our own perceptions.

5. Tropical Malady. All three features to date by Thai writer-director (and School of the Art Institute of Chicago graduate) Apichatpong Weerasethakul confirm that he's one of the most creative and unpredictable film artists now working anywhere. Each time out he becomes more ambitious, though *Mysterious Object at Noon* and *Blissfully Yours* were hardly modest efforts.



Clockwise from top left: *A History of Violence*, *Not on the Lips*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, *Capote*

Part one of *Tropical Malady* shows the budding romance between a soldier on leave and a shy country boy with a mixture of irony and tenderness. Part two turns folkloric and allegorical as the soldier travels through a dark forest, alternately stalking and being stalked by his lover in the form of a tiger spirit, with a talking baboon offering sage advice.

6. A tie between two kids' movies, **Howl's Moving Castle** and **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, both based on well-known English novels. I especially value the first, Hayao Miyazaki's animated feature—based on Diana Wynne Jones's book and the most commercially successful domestic release in the history of Japanese cinema—for the radical fluidity with which people and objects undergo constant transformation and for the implied philosophical position: that wisdom doesn't so much succeed callowness as peacefully coexist with it. The same can be said for dreams and waking reality. The triumph of Tim Burton's delirious riff on Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is more in the surrealist design and nightmarish dislocation than in some metaphysics. The off-putting aggressive mannerisms of

Johnny Depp as chocolate tycoon Willy Wonka are a reminder that Burton has better instincts for the visual than for human behavior.

7. A tie between two literary movies, **Yes** and **Capote**, both highly unexpected successes. *Yes*, a post-9/11 love story about an Irish-American scientist (Joan Allen) and a Lebanese surgeon working as a cook (Simon Abkarian), proved that contemporary world politics could be gracefully confronted in iambic pentameter. It's the best film Sally Potter's made since *The Gold Diggers* (1983), in part because she found something affirmative to say. *Capote* showed that Truman Capote's downfall could be partly explained by the ethical and emotional conflicts he went through while writing *In Cold Blood*. It had the advantages of a first-rate actor (Philip Seymour Hoffman), a highly focused script by Dan Futterman, and the economical direction of Bennett Miller.

8. A tie between two up-to-date works about art by old masters, Michelangelo Antonioni's 17-minute **Michelangelo Eye to Eye** (2004) and Ingmar Bergman's feature-length **Saraband** (2003). *Michelangelo Eye to Eye*, shown in 35-millimeter as part of the

Onion City Film Festival at Chicago Filmmakers, used digital technology to show Antonioni, now in his 90s and confined to a wheelchair since 1975, walking through Saint Peter's in Rome, looking at and caressing Michelangelo's restored Moses—one restored Michelangelo considering another. *Saraband*, a sequel to Bergman's 1973 *Scenes From a Marriage*, was shot in DV and shown that way at Bergman's insistence during its commercial release. It's a kind of postcinematic effort by Bergman, now in his 80s, made with a new technology after a 60-odd-year career using film. The content is typically self-punishing, but I could only admire his willingness to record such barrenness using a technology that wouldn't grant it even a modicum of glamour.

9. A tie between two plaintive comedies about lonely fuckups, Jim Jarmusch's **Broken Flowers** and Miranda July's **Me and You and Everyone We Know**. I could have made this a three-way tie and included Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale*, but once the shock of it wore off I didn't find its negativity as clarifying as I would have liked. Jarmusch's feature lacks the formal and moral

complexity of his underrated *Coffee and Cigarettes*, and the fact that he edited it backward is apparent, because it starts out rich and ends up depleted. Bill Murray's narcissism bores me almost as much here as it did in *Lost in Translation*, but the other actors are delightful. July's compulsion to tweak Americans for their puritanism is also somewhat off-putting, but the characters are sweet, her direction deft.

10. A tie between two examples of not-quite science fiction, Hal Hartley's modest **The Girl From Monday** and Wong Kar-wai's almost Wagnerian **2046**. Hartley's hilarious futuristic satire imagines a "dictatorship of the consumer," with citizens wearing bar codes on their wrists and regarded as "investments with growth potential," especially when they have sex. Wong's first film in 'Scope, a labyrinth of longing, begins in the last year of Hong Kong's economic and political independence but is set mainly in the 60s and concerns his parents' generation.

The year's biggest disappointment was a marked decline in the quality and vitality of the documentaries released. In 2004 we were given *Fahrenheit 9/11*,

The Corporation, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, and *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*. This year we got solid stuff—*Cinevardaphoto* (a Block Films screening), *Go Further*, *Grizzly Man*, *Magnificent Obsession: Frank Lloyd Wright's Buildings and Legacy in Japan*, *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, and *William Eggleston in the Real World*—but fewer revelations. Even the most documentarylike items in my top 15, *Ten Skies* and *Michelangelo Eye to Eye*, are subversions of the form, as is Jem Cohen's memorable *Chain*.

Sad to say, none of the documentaries I saw about the war in Iraq seemed adequate to the subject. They all seemed too "embedded," too timid, too dependent on cross-referencing Hollywood fantasies like *Apocalypse Now*. It's obviously important for *Gunner Palace* to show that some innocent families in Baghdad whose houses were ransacked for weapons got sent to Abu Ghraib even though no weapons were found, but it's offensive to treat such information as incidental and secondary. Ironically, Joe Dante's crude, fictional *Homecoming*—an angry satire about slain soldiers returning from their graves to vote the president out of office, which turned up on Showtime's "Masters of Horror"—came closer to bearing witness to the war's true meaning.

Far too much fuss has been made lately about liberal-minded fiction films that make liberal-minded viewers feel sensitive and virtuous. As a first feature, Paul Haggis's *Crash* certainly has its high points, but fresh insights into the nature and ramifications of racism aren't among them, and the complacent Altman-esque ironies don't help. (Curiously, Jan Hřebejk's uncannily similar and equally accomplished Czech film *Up and Down* was ignored by critics.) I was moved by both *Brokeback Mountain* and *Rent*, but they still seemed overly contained. Steven Spielberg may have learned to think beyond Zionist reflexes, but *Munich*, like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, is still supposed to make us feel good about the slaughter of Arabs, though we're now also supposed to feel bad about feeling good.

Ten other movies I liked, in alphabetical order: *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*; *The Brothers Grimm*; *Fear and Trembling*; *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*; *Lord of War*; *Notre Musique*; *Or (My Treasure)*; *Play*; *The Producers*; and *Safe Conduct*. My annual F.W. Murnau award, given to the film that did the most to alter my sense of film history, goes to the wonderful, radical 1966 Jacques Rivette documentary *Jean Renoir*, *the Boss: A Portrait of Michel Simon by Jean Renoir*, or *A Portrait of Jean Renoir by Michel Simon*, or *The Direction of Actors: Dialogue*. Unlike most of what I saw in 2005, it was blissfully free of compromise. **Q**

The Best Ten Movies You Probably Didn't See

Attendance is down, but quality is up.

By J.R. Jones

The big story in movies last year was plunging attendance: down 6.2 percent from 2005. Everyone had a theory about why, and among the proposed culprits were DVDs, crying children, on-screen advertisements, and patrons yakking on cell phones. My own guess was that people had wised up to all the slick advertising and puffy reviews, had grown tired of organizing their evenings around a two-hour block of corporatized cheese. But according to an online study cited last month in the *New York Times*, the real reason is more prosaic: ticket prices have risen about 5 percent since 2003, and people think they're too expensive. It's a sign of the times—moviegoing, a middle-class entertainment for more than a century, is becoming too expensive for the middle class.

My own experience is warped by the fact that I watch so many movies for free, but I too spent less at theaters in 2005. I have a DVD player and a big TV tube with a stereo speaker on either side, the best approximation of screen projection I've ever had in my home, and a Netflix subscription provides cheap access to just about anything issued domestically on DVD. But I've resolved to spend more time and money this year at my favorite theaters—the Music Box, LaSalle Bank Cinema, Gene Siskel Film Center, Landmark's Century Centre—because without them I wouldn't know about most of the movies below.

Last year's drop in attendance is particularly dispiriting because so many good movies came and went without finding an audience, from big-studio rollouts like *Cinderella Man* to art-house

secrets like *Lila Says*. I had even more trouble than usual whittling my year-end list down to ten movies, as evidenced by my weaselly genre categories at the end. In the 50s, when the nation's theater owners were first feeling the competition of television, they came up with the advertising slogan "Movies are better than ever." I wouldn't go that far, but in 2005 movies were better than usual. Here are the best:

1. **Junebug.** A hilarious and moving snapshot of the red state-blue state divide, Phil Morrison's funky comedy follows a cosmopolitan art dealer (Embeth Davidtz) to North Carolina, where she meets her new husband's seriously dysfunctional family and tries to land a fractious outsider artist for her Chicago gallery. Amy Adams

gives an Oscar-caliber performance as the adoring sister-in-law, and screenwriter Angus MacLachlan deftly shifts our sympathies between the two.

2. **Gunner Palace.** Michael Tucker arrived in Baghdad as an embedded reporter in September 2003; his documentary about an artillery division stationed in the bombed-out Al Azimiyah palace not only exposes problems that make the war unwinnable (soldiers' ignorance of the culture, ineffective training of Iraqi civil defense forces, abuse of the civilian population) but allows the young grunts to comment on their experience through rap and music.

3. **Lila Says.** Hands down the sexiest movie I saw this year, this French feature by Ziad Doueiri

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Clockwise from top left: *Junebug*, *Palindromes*, *Lila Says*, *My Summer of Love*, *Gunner Palace*, *The Devil's Rejects*

Jones

continued from page 17

(*West Beirut*) is set in a dilapidated Paris suburb, where a quiet, gifted Moroccan teenager (Mohammed Khouas) is drawn into a secret romance with a white neighbor (Vahina Giocante). Her exquisite beauty and sexual boldness make her a walking powder keg in the poor, largely Arab community, and a conflict involving the hero's leering buddies leads both lovers to the brink of tragedy—and to genuine love.

4. Grizzly Man. German master Werner Herzog finds a uniquely American focus for his career-long fascination with man and nature: Timothy Treadwell, a self-invented grizzly-bear expert who became a media personality before a grizzly devoured him in Alaska in 2003. Working with more than 100 hours of video footage Treadwell left behind, Herzog fashions an unnerving portrait of a troubled man whose congress with the grizzlies was both religion and death wish.

5. Me and You and Everyone We Know. Miranda July made an auspicious feature debut with this canny combination of reas-

suring formula and startling subject matter. The main story is a sweet screwball romance between a lonely performance artist (July) and a hapless shoe salesman (John Hawkes), but woven into this conventional fare are subplots that boldly explore the narrowing sexual divide between children and adults. July handles this taboo material with a disarming frankness and simplicity, absorbing it into her main concern—the joy of discovery, be it sexual, romantic, or creative.

6. Palindromes. Todd Solondz dives headfirst into the abortion controversy with this heartbreaking moral comedy about a young girl who is forced to have an abortion, runs away from home, and falls in with a born-again family of deformed children. Dividing the main character among eight actors, each chosen for her innocence, was commercial suicide, but it was also typical of a filmmaker who acts more from pure feeling than common sense.

7. My Summer of Love. A homely orphan in rural West Yorkshire (Nathalie Press) is drawn into a steamy affair with a posh bird

visiting from the city (Emily Blunt), much to the displeasure of the country girl's older brother (Paddy Considine), who's returned from prison a sanctimonious evangelical Christian. This small-scale British drama by Pawel Pawlikowski was promoted for its lesbian romance, but despite all the idyllic afternoons on rolling hills, it's a story of brutality and betrayal.

8. A History of Violence. In David Cronenberg's harrowing crime drama, some people are born to kill, others are born to be killed, and at the end a small-town family gathers at the dinner table, united and stained by this awful knowledge. This was adapted from a hard-boiled graphic novel, and Cronenberg, despite his own history of Grand Guignol, honors the form with a remarkably spare narrative.

9. The Best of Youth. This six-hour family saga by Marco Tullio Giordana traces a middle-class Italian clan from 1966 through the end of the century, as two brothers are united by their affection for a mentally ill young woman and then divided by poli-

tics. The film is well-paced and has an impressive historical sweep, though Giordana generates that broad perspective through intimate observation of the many characters' everyday lives. The film was produced as a TV miniseries but rejected by the Italian state network and ultimately released in theaters, where it screened in two three-hour segments; a DVD release is scheduled for February 7.

10. The Devil's Rejects. Who'd have thought that Rob Zombie, the freaky-looking dude who once fronted the metal band White Zombie, would conjure up the most frightening movie since *The Blair Witch Project*? Moving like a bat out of hell, this tale of a murderous family on the run from a vengeful sheriff taps into the same fear of backwoods crazies that's powered the genre since *Two Thousand Maniacs!* and the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Best noirs: *The Ice Harvest*, *A Tout de Suite*.

Best comedies: *Wedding Crashers*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Sarah Silverman: Jesus Is Magic*.

Best animated: *Howl's Moving Castle*, *Corpse Bride*, *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*.

Best general-interest docs: *March of the Penguins*, *Murderball*, *Tell Them Who You Are*, *Up for Grabs*.

Best music docs: *Fallen Angel: Gram Parsons*, *Moog*, *The Nomi Song*, *Rock School*, *We Jam Econo: The Story of the Minutemen*.

Best political docs: *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *The Future of Food*, *The Protocols of Zion*, *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*.

Best movies I couldn't jam into any of the above categories: *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*, *The Beautiful Country*, *Breakfast on Pluto*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Capote*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Crash*, *The Constant Gardener*, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, *Kontroll*, *Lager Cake*, *Millions*, *Munich*, *Nine Lives*, *Purple Butterfly*, *Separate Lies*, *The Squid and the Whale*, *Thumbsucker*, *Tony Takitani*, *Walk the Line*, *Yes*. **A**

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The Best Music of 2005

Our Section 3 regulars have made their lists. Even though some of them don't believe in lists, man.

Liz Armstrong

I was positively, wholeheartedly obsessed with everything on this list at some point in the year, either for months or just for a few hours. I've put the entries in alphabetical order, because arranging them according to the amount of time I fixated on them would be silly.

AIDS WOLF
"We Multiply," "Opposing Walls," "Fuck You McLean," "Panty Mind Extended" | MP3s on MySpace

A tangled orgy of wall-to-wall shrieking in a paradise full of dirty naked people.



COCOROSIE

Noah's Ark | Touch and Go
Stripped bare but still lush, heart-wrenching but kind of creepy—like the songs a Jean Genet novel would sing.

DELIA GONZALEZ & GAVIN RUSSOM
The Days of Mars | DFA/Astralwerks

Instrumental electronic art-gallery music that's like the deeply revelatory moment in the denouement of some trippy, gritty, long-lost 70s film set in a wintry New York, stretched out to last a whole hour.

HARRY MERRY

Well . . . Here's Another Nice Mess You've Got Me Into! | Tocado

Keyboard chaos and arrhythmic percussion, simultaneously giddy and desperate—the music a hamster might hear in its head as it tries to navigate the most elaborate Habitrail ever.

INDIAN JEWELRY

Invasive Exotics | Girlgang
Shamanic badasses wield shadowy guitars and sinister



Clockwise from left: Bettye LaVette, Spoon, Crooked Fingers, M.I.A.

analog synths to summon a vision of crows flying into a dark eternity.

SAM FLAX KEENER
"Backwards Fire" | MP3 at mindmilk.com

A transmission from Marc Bolan's ghost channeled by a blond, feather-haired New Age twink.



M.I.A.

Arular | XL/Interscope
Dangerous dance music that's equal parts jump-rope taunt,

hood grit, antifashion fashion, and *National Geographic*.

NEON BLONDE
Chandeliers in the Savannah | Dim Mak

Two of the Blood Brothers set jazzy, ass-ripping screeching to rollicking cabaret piano, spiny guitar, and hectic beats.

OCS

3 & 4: Songs About Death and Dying Vol. 3 and Get Stoved | Narnack

Like a lazy summer evening on the porch, tipping back warm whiskey with friends while some weird dusty troubadour guy no one really knows sings and plays guitar.

SSION

"World's Worth" | Sound Virus
Sleazy Robitussin party jams fist-fucking outrageous Vivienne Westwood punk.

Kabir Hamid



1. EDAN

Beauty and the Beat | Lewis

Edan spins a dense, claustrophobic matrix of 60s psychedelic rock samples around his deeply weird lyrics, which he delivers in an authoritative, scissor-tongued style. The hip-hop equivalent of a Salvador Dali painting.

2. THE GAME

The Documentary | Aftermath
Single-handedly rehabilitates

west-coast gangsta rap. The Game is so hardcore I bet all the muscles he uses to smile have atrophied right off his face.

3. BLACKALICIOUS

The Craft | Anti-
Not even their best, but still head and shoulders above almost all the other hip-hop this year—Gift of Gab's inexhaustible flow defies belief, and Chief Xcel packs ideas into his tracks like a guy who knows he won't run out.

4. COMMON

Be | GOOD/Geffen
Chicago's native son resurrects himself after the flop that was *Electric Circus*: his love songs to the ladies are great, and his love songs to the street corner are even better.

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Best Music



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5. CAGE

Hell's Winter | Definitive Jux

One of indie hip-hop's most notorious nutcases grows up and decides to share: openly autobiographical stories from his incredibly messed-up life go toe-to-toe with some apocalyptic Def Jux beats.

6. KANYE WEST

Late Registration | Roc-a-Fella

Whether Kanye's lyrics are charming or just cutesy is open to debate, but there's no arguing with the richness and maturity of his almost orchestral beats.

7. DANGERDOOM

The Mouse and the Mask | Epitaph

Doom. Danger Mouse. The Cartoon Network. Together they cut an irreverent fart in the general direction of all that's self-serious in hip-hop.

8. ASAMOV

And Now... | 6 Hole

The debut from this four-man Florida posse is the album Little Brother wish they'd made this year. Laid-back, infectious grooves with fun, feel-good rhymes.

9. ONE.BE.LO

S.O.N.O.G.R.A.M. | Fat Beats

Former Binary Star member rhymes his ass off over a warm, jazzy soundscape.

10. ATMOSPHERE

You Can't Imagine How Much Fun We're Having | Rhymesayers

Solid all around, and the closer, "Little Man"—where Slug reads letters he's written to his son, his father, and himself—is one of the most self-aware hip-hop tracks I've heard in a long time.

Keith Harris



1. ART BRUT

Bang Bang Rock & Roll | Fierce Panda

Wire-weaned English lads use faux-Fall two-and-a-half-chord barrages to set up Eddie Argos's punch lines about forming a band, failing in the sack, and freaking out in art museums.

2. GOGOL BORDELLO

Gypsy Punks: Underdog World Strike | Side One Dummy

Lyric-spitting madman Eugene Hutz and his merry band throw a spastic Gypsy dance party for marginalized mongrels everywhere.

3. M.I.A.

Arular | XL/Interscope

This displaced Sri Lankan art student has more than earned every overthought review with her politically ambiguous agit-pop—and her dancehall-tinged Brit-hop beats are so good they render all that verbiage irrelevant.

4. THE HOLD STEADY

Separation Sunday | Frenchkiss

These Brooklyn boys now confidently inhabit the bar-band idiom they once merely imitated, which helps Craig Finn's caustic lyrics jell—you don't have to be a four-eyed lapsed Catholic from the upper midwest to appreciate his fractured urban legends.



5. KANYE WEST

Late Registration | Roc-a-Fella

Kanye demands the best in collaborators, and when that won't work he samples them—top-tier pop producer Jon Brion adds his grandiose arrangements, and the voices of Ray Charles and Otis Redding root the whole project in the soul tradition.

6. SLEATER-KINNEY

The Woods | Sub Pop

All the Led Zep comparisons obscured another obvious reference point—this is what Heart could've been if they'd interrogated the power of boy rock as expertly as they harnessed it.

7. THIONE SECK

Orientation | Stern's Africa

Youssou N'Dour's 2004 release *Egypt* untangled the Arabic and Middle Eastern roots of West Africa's musical culture, and this disc from Dakar's perpetual number two attraction undertakes something similar—though it's sweeter and earthier, and reaches even further east to spice the music with Bollywood fillips.

8. MOUNTAIN GOATS

The Sunset Tree | 4AD

A longtime enemy of the autobiographical lyric, John Darnielle crafts these acerbic songs about his own adolescence with the same artistic distance that makes his third-person narratives so powerful.

9. MINOTAUR SHOCK

Maritime | 4AD

David Edwards undercuts the whimsy in his intricate laptop pop with wistfulness, as if to ask, "Yes, you got the high score, but was it really worth it?"

10. FIONA APPLE

Extraordinary Machine | Epic

These scaled-back rerecordings trump the intriguing but fussy demos leaked online, proving that a major-label intrusion into

the creative process can sometimes have a happy ending.

Jessica Hopper



1. SUFJAN STEVENS

Illinois | Asthmatic Kitty

Because Chicago is worth it!

2. SPOON

Gimme Fiction | Merge

Perfection in rock isn't interesting or compelling, except when it is. I can't help but surrender my breath to the sweet plodding of the piano and drums on this one.

3. MAKE BELIEVE

Shock of Being | Flameshovel

Tim Kinsella's been threatening to give us a real punk band since 1997—who knew his version would be this commie-situationist blitzkrieg combining the aesthetic of Pere Ubu with the attitude and ideals of Huggy Bear and Born Against.

4. LUNGFISH

Feral Hymns | Dischord

The only band worth owning 11 albums by. All Day I Dream About Dan Higgs's Beard.

5. MARY J. BLIGE

The Breakthrough | Geffen

I know it might sound sacrilegious given the exalted status of Blige's early records, but *The Breakthrough* is nuclear—it's her most consistent disc from song to song, the cameos are pure fire, and the production is fuck a brick. Mary's back.

6. JOHN DOE

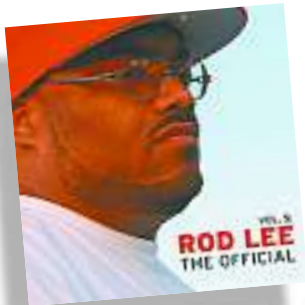
Forever Hasn't Happened Yet | Yep Roc

It's such a relief when the new record from an aging punk hero doesn't make you wish he'd left well enough alone. There's still nobody who duets better with lady singers.

7. RIVER CITY TANLINES

River City Tanlines | Dirtnap

A bona fide icon with her own label, Alicja Trout is the Ian MacKaye of garage punk—and on top of that she solos like a fever. This is just a collection of singles, but it's sick, sick business.



8. ROD LEE

Vol. 5: The Official | Morpheus

Baltimore club is God's dance music: combining cold Detroit-

tech stasis, jackin' house, and the nasty boom of southern bounce, it meets all your needs in a single song. Asses are clapping in heaven.

9. PELICAN

The Fire in Our Throats Will Beckon the Thaw | Hydra Head

Lush instrumental metal that appeals equally to fans of Egg Hunt and Iron Maiden. Several songs here clock in at around 11 minutes, but they could all stand to be two or three days longer.



10. COMMON

Be | GOOD/Geffen

The musical counterpart to Bell Hooks's *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*—self-examination and a love ethic as an antidote to mainstream hip-hop's apocalyptic patriarchy.

Monica Kendrick

The notion of ranking my favorite music is incomprehensible to me. First I think, "Is this album of rootsy hillbilly blues better than this album of black-hole drone?" And then I think, "What the hell kind of question is that?" In alphabetical order, then:



CROOKED FINGERS

Dignity and Shame | Merge

This dark, quirky, and very comely singer-songwriter record had me at hello—or at the very least at the asking-for-directions part.

DALEK

Absence | Ipecac

Ever wondered how weird hip-hop could get if it were set free of the expectation that normal humans should be able to dance to it? Dalek shows us one possibility, wrapping skittery beats in searing, droning goth-industrial guitar.

DEAD MEADOW

Feathers | Matador

These D.C. psychonauts have a swoopy, sludgy sound thick enough to pour on pancakes, with rhythms like slow-swaying seaweed and lyrics that might as well be Robert Plant cutups—but unlike many other bands flourishing under the "stoner rock" grow lights, they hardly hint at post-1975 metal. Nor do they taint their lumbering riffs with a sur-

plus of aggression: they sound heavy, hammered, and happy.

MARIANNE FAITHFULL

Before the Poison | Anti-

Possibly her best since *Broken English* back in 1979. She's been working that singular voice—the jaded older woman with her wicked wisdom—since she was what, 19? And it sounds even better now that she's aged into it.

HIGH ON FIRE

Blessed Black Wings | Relapse

I didn't think dense, smart, unhyphenated metal needed anyone to defend its honor, but I'm still happy to watch these guys leave all the other would-be champions in the dust.



IRON & WINE

Woman King | Sub Pop

Every so often you hear a song so perfect it gives you goose bumps, like this EP's title track—eerie, hermetic folk that'd earn the disc a spot on my list even if the rest of it sucked.

MODEY LEMON

The Curious City | Birdman

This trippy, tribal, mannerist neogage, undoubtedly the product of ill-advised whackjob ambition, succeeds in spite of sounding like it's constantly falling apart—just like about 87 percent of my favorite rock records ever.

SUNN O)))

The Grimmrobe Demos | Southern Lord

Like being in the womb, only better. And louder. (No offense, mom.)

TRAVELING BELL

Scatter Ways | Secret Eye

On her drony, elegant solo debut, Kathleen Baird of Spires That in the Sunset Rise sounds steely and fierce—like a dryad in a spiked tree waiting for a lumberjack to make her day. Think Nico's *Desertshore* without the desperation.

WILLIAM ELLIOTT WHITMORE

Ashes to Dust | Southern

There are a lot of whippersnappers on Fat Possum who wish they were this guy—or if they don't, they should.

Peter Margasak

1. BETTYE LAVETTE

I've Got My Own Hell to Raise | Anti-

Would've been the comeback of the year if LaVette had ever gone away—perfect production, classic soul arrangements, and material by the likes of Aimee Mann, Fiona Apple, and Dolly Parton that sounds shockingly great in her hands.

2. AMADOU & MARIAM

Dimanche a Bamako | Nonesuch
Wunderkind producer Manu Chao keeps the swirling arrangements and hypnotizing beats small, letting the outside personalities of this blind Malian couple shine through.

3. DAVE DOUGLAS

Keystone | Greenleaf
The trumpeter crafts his best electroacoustic jams yet—as sound tracks for some of Fatty Arbuckle's forgotten silent films.

**4. DEERHOOF**

The Runners Four | Kill Rock Stars/5RC

Deerhoof fuses twee pop and noise rock organically, with a thousand delicate connections—and though this album is the band's most immediate and streamlined, that carefully balanced yin and yang hasn't lost a bit of its bushy-tailed energy.

5. SEU JORGE

Cru | Wrasse
The David Bowie songs he sang on-screen in *The Life Aquatic* made him a celebrity, but these strikingly original, stripped-down sambas will make him a star.

6. M.I.A.

Arular | XL/Interscope
Maya Arulpragasam's charisma transforms this composite of familiar forms—hip-hop, electro, bhangra, grime, favela funk—into something fresh and irresistible.

7. CAMILLE

Le Fil | Virgin
This French chanteuse, better known as one of the singers from the Nouvelle Vague project, uses multi-tracked vocals—from melodies to mouth percussion—to create a sly pop masterpiece that flirts with chanson, funk, and doo-wop.

8. ATOMIC

The Bikini Tapes | Jazzland
Five of Scandinavia's finest improvisers, captured here on a



Clockwise from top: Sleater-Kinney, Sufjan Stevens, Common, Edan

three-disc live set, bring the intensity and adventurousness of free jazz to carefully composed postpop tunes—even the searing solos are controlled and concise.

9. DOMENICO GUACCERO

Da Cantare | Die Schachtel
This Italian composer wrote these mind-blowing vocal works between 1951 and 1983. Some of the material sounds like insane-asylum opera; elsewhere Guaccero abandons all pretensions to genre, layering weird, blocky percussion atop harmonically berserk choral singing.

**10. MARCUS SCHMICKLER & JOHN TILBURY**

Variety | A-Musik
German laptop wizard

Marcus Schmickler alternately caresses and dices the minimalist figures of AMM pianist John Tilbury in this serene but startling improvised set.

Bob Mehr

There's a dead heat for the number one spot, so my 2005 list actually goes to eleven.

**1. RICHARD HAWLEY**

Coles Corner | Mute
Former Pulp guitarist captures the late-night magic of Frank Sinatra, Lee Hazlewood, and Scott Walker on this set of nostalgic pop numbers.

DAN PENN & SPOONER OLDHAM

Moments From This Theatre | Proper American
Two of music's greatest storytellers—and one of its greatest songwriting teams—run through their back catalogs in front of an awestruck Dublin audience. *Moments* has been available as an import since 1999, but was finally released in the U.S. this year.

**2. EDGAR "JONES" JONES**

Soothing Music for Stray Cats | Viper
Cheeky, brilliant pop from the former leader of the Liverpool band the Stairs, combining sounds from jazz, doo-wop, and classic R & B—and recorded almost entirely on a digital eight-track in his home.

3. EDDIE HINTON

Beautiful Dream: Sessions Vol. 3 | Zane
A collection of unreleased gems from the late lamented southern soul man and session ace.

4. CAST KING

Saw Mill Man | Locust
This recently rediscovered country songsmith and onetime Sun Records prospect released his astonishing debut album at the ripe young age of 79.

5. REIGNING SOUND

Home for Orphans | Sympathy for the Record Industry
Greg Cartwright and his garage-rock gang retrofit a clutch of their favorite tunes as glorious Memphis country-soul.

6. OUTRAGEOUS CHERRY

Our Love Will Change the World | Rainbow Quartz
On its seventh full-length, Matthew Smith's Detroit combo toughens up its jangly 60s fuzz pop with barbed lyrics and lean arrangements.
continued on page 22

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Best Music

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7. PHANTOM BUFFALO Shishimumu | Rough Trade

The year's most offbeat and inventive psych-pop record was originally pressed in a tiny run in 2003, back when this group from Portland, Maine, was still calling itself the Ponys. Rough Trade gave it a widespread release last winter.

8. VARIOUS ARTISTS Cult Cargo: Belize City Boil Up | Numero Group

Anthology of reggae, R & B, and pop produced by artists from the tiny Central American nation in the 1960s and '70s.

9. BETTYE LAVETTE I've Got My Own Hell to Raise | Anti-

Producer Joe Henry helmed this excellent studio comeback from the old-school R & B diva.

10. SHARON JONES & THE DAP-KINGS Naturally | Daptone

On their second disc, Jones and her nimble band plunge into soul so deep you can't see the bottom.

Bill Meyer



1. VARIOUS ARTISTS American Primitive Volume 2 | Revenant

Before he died, John Fahey plucked these 50 gloriously eccentric obscurities from 78s made at the dawn of American recorded music.

2. JACK ROSE Kensington Blues | VHF

The best of the new generation of American Primitive guitarists infuses his lyrical rags, blues, and ragas with remorseless rock heaviness.

3. THE FALL The Complete Peel Sessions 1978-2004 | Castle

A six-CD set that's both a trove of rarities and an invaluable condensed history of this cantankerous English postpunk institution.

4. ROGER SMITH & LOUIS MOHOLO-MOHOLO The Butterfly and the Bee | Emanem

The title is a play on the phrase "insect music," long used to describe (or dismiss) English free improvisation, but it doubles as a metaphor for this duo's unusual sound: Smith's light, prickling acoustic guitar adroitly balances the much heavier tones of Moholo-Moholo's percussion.

5. HOOD Outside Closer | Domino

Lyrical, lo-fi indie rock, treated to hip-hop-inspired production and expressing a deeply English rural melancholy.

6. KONONO NO. 1 Congotronics | Crammed Discs

This Congolese dance band uses a sound system built from junk, auto parts, and repurposed megaphones to amplify thumb-piano grooves past the point of disintegration.

7. WIRE The Scottish Play: 2004 | Pink Flag

These legendary art punks prove that angry young men don't always mellow out with the passage of time.

8. LAU NAU Kuutarha | Locust

Rough-hewn, rustic Finnish acid folk.



9. THELONIOUS MONK QUARTET WITH JOHN COLTRANE At Carnegie Hall | Blue Note

This 1957 concert recording, lost for nearly half a century, turns out to be the most complete portrait of the brief but momentous association between these two jazz giants.

10. LOW The Great Destroyer | Sub Pop

The quietest band in rock turns it up—way up.

Brian Nemtusak



1. MEAT BEAT MANIFESTO At the Center | Thirsty Ear

Electro-dub-industrial trailblazer Jack Dangers charts a bold new course on this elegantly jazzed-up outing. A shotgun blast of antivenin for today's poisoned brains.

2. BROADCAST Tender Buttons | Warp

Addition by subtraction: James Cargill and Trish Keenan drop their supporting cast and produce their most delicate and gripping album to date. A wild, fluttering rush, like a clockwork wax-wing crashing through windowpane after windowpane.



Clockwise from top: Vijay Iyer, Iron & Wine, Hold Steady, Cocomorosie, Low

3. PONYS Celebration Castle | In the Red

Jered Gummere and company soar to desperate new heights, alighting on the aerie where Sonic Youth and Joy Division are reimagined as one another.

4. EPOXIES Stop the Future | Fat Wreck Chords

Even better than the Rezillian fare on their breezy and blistering debut. Everyone from the Faint to Gwen Stefani could learn a thing or two from these guys about how this neo-new-wave thing oughta be done.

5. CARIBOU The Milk of Human Kindness | Domino

Dan Snaith, served with cease-and-desist from Handsome Dick regarding the Manitoba moniker, finally works off his debt to Boards of Canada with his first full-length as Caribou. Psychedelimitorik excursions to the subarctic reaches of the glitchtronica frontier.

6. LADYTRON Witching Hour | Rykodisc

This disturbed dance music could be the sound track for a lost Deodato film—it pulses with a palpable, delicious unease that's like a photo negative of 604's synthetic euphoria.

7. GORILLAZ Demon Days | Virgin

I like a few tracks on the first album better than anything here, but *Demon Days* is a more cohesive

effort—it's even impossible to hate the song from that iPod commercial.

8. FRANZ FERDINAND You Could Have It So Much Better | Domino

For my money, still the best (and most likable) of the post-Strokes boy bands. On their second disc, tongue-in-cheek art-rock dandy Alex Kapranos and crew simply dish up more of the same Roxy rock—but when it's this good, who cares?

9. AMON TOBIN Chaos Theory | Ninja Tune

The reigning lord of the other-worldly soundscape—whose basalt plateaus team with metallized insectoid legions, marching in the glare of exploding stars—does the sound track for a first-person shooter, Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*. Can you say "duh"?



10. KAISER CHIEFS Employment | Universal

I was initially pretty dismissive of this album, but it's grown on me like all hell. Even the less juiced-

up songs, which at first seemed like above-average filler, now feel as strong as the hits—I guess false modesty is as classically diffident a Britpop pose as any.

J. Niimi

1. M.I.A. Arular | XL/Interscope

Shriekin' Sri Lankan makes post-terrorism dance pop from Atari glossolalia, talking toy machine guns, and a whole lot of dance-hall hustle. With a militant Tamil separatist for a dad, she's so authentic she makes Ice Cube look like Jello Biafra.



2. LCD SOUNDSYSTEM LCD Soundsystem | DFA/Capitol

Affectless dance-floor electronica gets a snarky sense of humor. Irony will free your mind, and your ironic ass will follow.

3. ELECTRELANE Axes | Too Pure

Programmatic post-rock with heart and balls as well as the req-

uisite brains, wringing suspense and drama out of its sonic plot arc like a good film noir.

4. DANGERDOOM

The Mouse and the Mask | Epitaph
The Shel Silverstein of rap joins forces with the *Grey Album*'s furry rabble-rouser and realizes that the decline of narrative in hip-hop frees him up to talk about stuff besides nines, Escalades, and pussy.

5. THE FALL

The Complete Peel Sessions 1978-2004 | Castle

A fitting tribute to both the Fall and the late great John Peel. The world would be a noticeably crappier place had neither of them existed.



6. JENS LEKMAN

Oh You're So Silent Jens | Secretly Canadian

Sensitive Swede nominates himself to be the Scott Walker of indie pop. Warm, lonely music for bus stations at 3 AM—like "Midnight Train to Georgia," except from the point of view of the guy who's pawned all his hopes for a ticket to a simpler place and time.

7. COMET GAIN

City Fallen Leaves | Kill Rock Stars
These Brits lean hard on the canonical C86 sound, especially the way domesticated amp clutter catalyzes the ugly beauty of confessional cockney speak-song.

8. WILDERNESS

Wilderness | Jagjaguwar

Baltimore boys show up late to the early-aughts postpunk yard sale and get stuck with the part of PiL nobody wanted: the vocals. They make lemonade.

9. BASEMENT JAXX

The Singles | XL

Pixelated dance-pop outfit swallows club-culture flotsam—styles, singers, samples, timbres—like it's some sort of magical food that makes you hungrier the more you eat.



10. KELLEY POLAR

Love Songs of the Hanging Gardens | Environ

Croatian violin prodigy gets expelled from Juilliard for what his label claims was a "riot" during his master's recital, then becomes a postmashup club star,

fusing pop melodies played on classical instruments to anabolic disco beats.

Miles Raymer



1. SPOON

Gimme Fiction | Merge

The long wait for Britt Daniel to stop making merely good albums and put out something great is over—this tense, creepy postpunk pop sounds like a 70s AM radio signal bounced off a lonely satellite.



2. HOLD STEADY

Separation Sunday | Frenchkiss

Possibly the year's best work of literature, and you know no one in the *New York Review of Books* sounds like the E Street Band gone feral.

3. KONONO NO. 1

Congotronics | Crammed Discs

The world's best street musicians make Powerbooks and sequencers look bad by banging out the year's densest, ass-shakingest dance record on homemade thumb pianos.

4. MAKE BELIEVE

Shock of Being | Flameshovel

Lyrical, it's probably the most relevant record of the year, and probably still will be when everyone else catches up to Make Believe's next-level tweakcore style sometime around 2011.

5. COMMON

Be | GOOD/Geffen

With a little push from Kanye, Common dropped the record-geek navel gazing and got back to writing raps that shout out feminism as fiercely as other MCs rep their clothing lines. On "Go" he even got folks to dance to John Mayer.

6. CELEBRATION

Celebration | 4AD

Gothic and vaudevillian and steeped in slapback, this album makes me picture one of those cartoon bands of skeletons who play music on their own bones—except it's actually scary.

7. M83

Before the Dawn Heals Us | Mute

Epic in its scope and sadness and impossible to box into

just one genre. Like the sound track to the dystopian sci-fi movie that 2005 sometimes seemed to be.

8. BLOC PARTY

Silent Alarm Remixed | Vice

Underground dance-floor tastemakers rip apart an OK Britpop record and stitch it back together into something that lives up to the hype.

9. DAVID BANNER

Certified | SRC/Universal

One part conscious rapper and two parts strip-club hedonist, Banner makes Dirty South bangers with a pissed-off political bite to match their tear-up-the-club rowditude.

10. VARIOUS ARTISTS

The Sexual Life of the Savages: Underground Post-Punk from Sao Paulo, Brasil | Soul Jazz

Sao Paulo's early-80s postpunks injected hot blood into the genre's ironic poses—further proof that Brazilians can make any style of music exponentially funkier.

Ann Sterzinger



1. MOMUS

Otto Spooky | American Patchwork

Sometimes I think Nick Currie is one of them real live genius things, but what do I know?

2. MARGOT & THE NUCLEAR SO & SO'S

The Dust of Retreat | Standard Recording Company

You could call these self-described "scarf rockers" precious, or you could quit resisting their wistful, wintry tunes and let your tears wash the crud from your soul.



3. DMBQ

The Essential Sounds From the Far East | Estrus

This vortex of wild, psych-drenched blues-punk would've made my list even without the compassion points I awarded the band after the death of their brilliant drummer in a van crash. China Mana, R.I.P.

4. INVISIBLE BALLETT

Escaping Light | Nilaihah

I usually have to track down synth-pop records and order

them myself, since the labels that release this stuff aren't making enough money to send promo copies to folks like me. I'm sure I've overlooked a few worthy contenders as a result, but Lin Chen's silky, sinewy, soulful voice makes this the best example I found all year.

5. DEADLY SNAKES

Porcella | In the Red

Nick Cave has the Beatles over for a barbecue and serves them . . . to Satan.

6. ANTONY & THE JOHNSONS

I Am a Bird Now | Secretly Canadian

If Antony's androgynous cabaret doesn't make you weepy, you need an empathy transplant.



7. EPOXIES

Stop the Future | Fat Wreck Chords

If you don't fall in love with new-wave goddess Roxy Epoxy, you might want to check your libido for leaks.

8. LAST TARGET

One Shot, One Kill | BYO Records

Has there ever been a bad year for Japanese punk? Not since I hit puberty at least.

9. VAZ

The Lie That Matches the Furniture | Narnack

Just when you're getting jaded in the indie-metal haunted house, a real live loup-garou pops out from behind a giant foam-rubber tombstone and gives you the BJ of your life.

10. TENEMENT HALLS

Knitting Needles & Bicycle Bells | Merge

Chris Lopez, of the dearly departed Rock*a*Teens, multi-tracked this almost-solo disc of raw but delicate garage—reminiscent of the Thrills, if they sounded less canned and tidy.

Neil Tesser



1. VIJAY IYER

Reimagining | Savoy

The clearest statement yet of the pianist's Indian-American fusion: he stitches mathematical theories and ancestral modes into jagged, powerfully lyrical music that excites both head and heart.

2. MESHELL NDEGEOCELLO

The Spirit Music Jamia: Dance of the Infidel | Shanachie

The superb bassist opens up to jazz both past and present—the arrangements recall electric Miles, and the guest musicians include Don Byron, Neal Evans, and Wallace Roney—and in the process points to a fertile possible future.

3. KEITH JARRETT

Radiance | ECM

Solo piano, but a lot more cutting than the pastoral stuff you expect from Jarrett. Two Japanese concerts recorded three days apart and combined into one kaleidoscopic, 17-part treatise.



4. DAVE DOUGLAS

Keystone | Greenleaf

In case you just can't believe that the silent films of the long-discredited Fatty Arbuckle could've inspired the year's best fusion disc, this release includes a DVD where Douglas's music provides an obliquely complementary sound track to the on-screen chicanery.



5. JOHN HOLLENBECK

LARGE ENSEMBLE

A Blessing | OmniTone

Having recently revitalized chamber jazz with his Claudia Quintet, the drummer and composer reinvents the jazz orchestra, nodding to Charles Mingus, Aaron Copland, Thad Jones, and Steve Reich.

6. THELONIOUS MONK QUARTET WITH JOHN COLTRANE

At Carnegie Hall | Blue Note

This technically superior recording of an artistically superior 1957 concert provides the most valuable window yet into the short-lived Monk-Coltrane partnership—and its discovery was jazz's feel-good story of the year.

7. ERNEST DAWKINS'S CHICAGO 12

Misconceptions of a Delusion

Shades of a Charade | Dawk

Written by local saxist Ernest Dawkins to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the Chicago Seven conspiracy trial, this piece captures much of the lively burlesque (both intended and not) of that time and place, with its anger, pathos, and helter-skelter anarchy.

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Best Music

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8. RICHARD GALLIANO

NEW YORK TRIO

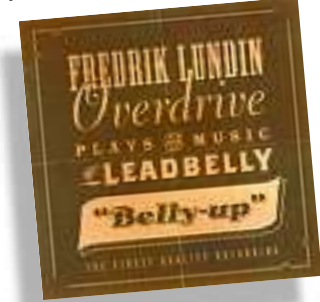
Ruby, My Dear | Dreyfus

Galliano plays accordion, and it speaks to his virtuosity and musicality that you won't be tempted into a single Lawrence Welk joke.

9. ANTHONY BROWN'S ORCHESTRA

Rhapsodies | Water Baby

Brown has already transformed the music of Ellington and Monk, and to complete the triptych he's rescored, reharmonized, and restructured Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, incorporating Asian influences and instruments and a touch of Latin flavor. Scandalous, heretical!—until you hear it.



10. FREDRIK LUNDIN OVERDRIVE

"Belly-Up": The Music of Leadbelly | Stunt

This Danish saxist leads his band in an inventive tribute to the American folk-blues icon—and doubles the ante by dedicating each arrangement, in spirit as well as in name, to an American jazz great, from Charles Mingus to Gil Evans.

David Whiteis

Given the range of subgenres and styles represented, I haven't ranked these—consider each the best of its kind that I encountered in 2005.

EUGENE "HIDEAWAY" BRIDGES

Coming Home | Armadillo

Buoyant but tasteful guitar blues, technically flawless and deeply soulful—even the most exuberant good-timey tunes sound refreshingly adult.

GOSPEL KEYBOARD TRIO

Heavenly Keys | The Sirens

Chicago keyboardists Willie Jones, Leonard Maddox, and Dwayne Mason proclaim their faith in a set of churchy hymns, up-tempo shouters, and stately spiritual songs, both solo and as a trio—it's virtuosity infused with an uplifting earnestness and joy.

BUDDY GUY

Bring 'Em In | Silvertone

Lately this Chicago blues legend has developed a distressing tendency toward overwrought performances, especially in full-band settings, but he imbues the updated 60s soul tunes here (and the occasional pop number, like Dylan's "Lay Lady Lay") with emotional depth and good taste.

HERMON HITSON

You Are Too Much for the Human Heart | Soul-Tay-Shus

A compilation showcasing this almost forgotten 60s soul singer from Atlanta. Hitson was hampered by second-rate production for most of his career, but at his best he packed an emotional wallop to rival James Brown's or Otis Redding's.

DENISE LASALLE

Wanted | Ecko

Odes to womanly prowess, both in and out of bed, from a veteran soul-blues stylist, laced with her trademark take-no-prisoners raunch and leavened with good humor.



BETTIE LAVETTE

I've Got My Own Hell to Raise | Anti-

LaVette can extract more feeling from a single phrase than most soul singers get from an entire set. You may need to lie down after this one.

AARON NEVILLE

Tell It Like It Is | Empire Musicwerks

When this angelic crooner unfurls his quavering falsetto on a ballad like this set's classic title tune, hearts melt for miles around—but he can also sharpen his voice to match the streetsy signifying on jumpy R & B numbers like "A Hard Nut to Crack" and "Space Man."

DAN PENN & SPOONER OLDHAM

Moments From This Theatre | Proper American

It takes a hell of a singer to pull off a line like "Go back home, see the old folks / They've all had heart attacks and light strokes," but blue-eyed soul brother Dan Penn is a hell of a singer. He and Spooner Oldham, who wrote and produced some of the most memorable R & B of the 60s, reprise some of their best tunes in gritty, graceful country-folk versions.

BOBBY RUSH

Night Fishin' | Deep Rush

This time Rush mixes his usual tales of backdoor shenanigans with songs like "We Had Love," a thoughtful meditation on a childhood enriched by old-fashioned family values—a welcome glimpse of the serious-minded

philosopher behind his trickster's mask.

JAMES BLOOD ULMER

Birthright | Hyena

Aided by producer Vernon Reid, Ulmer creates the feel of a barren, haunted landscape on this ferocious solo acoustic record. His adventurous playing and naked lyrics—about sex, race, and religion—both invoke and transcend the deepest roots of the blues.

Douglas Wolk

1. LCD SOUNDSYSTEM

LCD Soundsystem | DFA/Capitol

James Murphy is the best dance producer in America, and he makes a pretty great rock star too.

2. THE NEW PORNOGRAPHERS

Twin Cinema | Matador

The Canadian power-pop legion sets a new world record for hooks per unit time.

3. VARIOUS ARTISTS

One Kiss Can Lead to Another: Girl Group Sounds Lost & Found | Rhino

Five hours of magnificent 150-second epics from the 60s, packaged in a hat box. A *hat box*, people.



4. THE FALL

The Complete Peel Sessions 1978-2004 | Castle

Twenty-seven years of status reports from a marble-mouthed avant-garde poet and his riff-crazy backup bands.

5. SUFJAN STEVENS

Illinois | Asthmatic Kitty

It's not just his songs, as smart and tender as they are—it's those ravishing arrangements.

6. JUDEE SILL

Dreams Come True | Water

This hopeful anticipation of the apocalypse, recorded in 1974, would've been the singer-songwriter's third album if she'd lived to see it finished; it was finally mixed and released this year.



7. SLEATER-KINNEY

The Woods | Sub Pop

Veteran Portland trio cranks up the amps to "pulverize" and barrels off into terra incognita.

8. THE MOUNTAIN GOATS

Come, Come to the Sunset Tree | self-released

The LP-only edition of John Darnielle's taut, compassionate valediction to an abusive stepfather, with home-recorded versions of the songs on the CD.

9. SHARON JONES & THE DAP-KINGS

Naturally | Daptone

As far as this joyful funk band is concerned, it's 1971 and they're glued to the top of the R & B charts.

10. PRINCESS SUPERSTAR

My Machine | !K7

A science-fiction hip-hop opera in which motormouthed Concetta Kirschner turns all other celebrities into "duplicants" of herself.

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Music

VARIOUS ARTISTS ONE KISS CAN LEAD TO ANOTHER: GIRL GROUP SOUNDS LOST AND FOUND (RHINO)
EVIE SANDS ANY WAY THAT YOU WANT ME (REV-OLA)

Girls, Girls, Girls

And you thought “women in rock” had it rough.

By Jessica Hopper

The first time I stole a record it was because I wanted to be in a girl group. It was easy. I went to the library, picked up a copy of *25 Years of Motown*, cut out the magnetic alarm strip with a razor, slipped the five-album set into my large schoolbag with the spray-painted peace sign on it, and headed home to listen to “Reflections” by the Supremes a few dozen times in a row. I was obsessed with Diana Ross, Mary Wilson, and Florence Ballard and desperately wanted to be them all. That wasn’t the norm amongst 11-year-old Minnesota girls in 1988, but my fandom was immutable. Much as their harmonies killed me, what I really loved was their aesthetic: Mary had the better voice and bouffier hair, but Diana was my favorite because she always seemed to be wearing twice as much eyeliner. They were the most majestic representation of young womanhood I knew, so princesslike, and I bought into the dream of it completely.

The four-disc genre retrospective *One Kiss Can Lead to Another: Girl Group Sounds Lost and Found* (Rhino) is a monument to that dream: the romantic fever dream of teenage-girl narratives written by adult songwriters. In the pre-Beatles days of the early 1960s girl groups came to dominate the charts, supposedly due to the vacuum left by the overseas deployment of Elvis and the deaths of Eddie Cochran, Ritchie Valens, and Buddy Holly. Trios and quartets of high school- and college-age women, many of them black, supplanted slick-haired boys on the radio and got a chance to tell their



side of the story—sort of.

Crooning and cooing about the triumphs and travails of young love (and little else), wagging gloved fingers in time to their honey-sweet three-part *no no nos*, the girl groups proffered the inverse of the thrusty rebellion and innuendo that had been codified by men: the ultra-chaste longings of a bunch of purported virgins in satiny evening gowns.

Looking back, girl groups seem the epitome of the gender prescription of the time: that women and girls should be guileless and pure, doting and servile, never fully women unless validated by the love of a man. In song after song, the promise of romance and the redemption it brings is

strong: “Please find it in your heart / To make all my dreams come true / Let me get close to you,” sings country star Skeeter Davis on her girl-pop turn “Let Me Get Close to You.” Over a snare crack that sounds like a cannon shot and a bed of perfectly harmonized *bum-she-bum-ooo-eee-ooo-aaa*, the Chiffons’ Judy Craig booms with pride, “I have a boyfriend / Met him a week ago / He’s mine forever / Last night he told me so,” on “I Have a Boyfriend.” Then, so we don’t think she’s some good-night-kissing hussy, she adds, “Someday we’ll walk down the aisle / So in love.” Their physical desires can be safely expressed only through double entendre, and when they stray—as with “bad girl” groups

like the Shangri-Las—things end in tragedy.

The girls are never true aggressors; rather, they are t-r-u l-u-v hopefuls, keeping the heart flames alive somewhere beneath their bullet bras. For these girls there’s just one kind of boy—the One and Only—and their love, it’s Forever and Always. As for their love objects, they’re bad boys, other girls’ boys, ex-boys, and next boys, and they’re all elusive. Whether he’s a commitmentphobic cad, a cheater, an abuser, or a dude with a drag-race death wish, she wants only to make him happy—and all he can do is disappear. She can *shoop shoop shoop* all night long, but he ain’t coming back. In the end she’s left with noth-

ing but a tear-stained pillow and poetic metaphors: “All I can see on the beach / Is a piece of driftwood / And it somehow reminds me / Of the twisted memories / Left in my mind” goes the dramatic spoken interlude of the Bitter Sweets’ “What a Lonely Way to Start the Summer.”

But *One Kiss Can Lead to Another* is more than just an exhaustive tribute to broken hearts and high-tease hairdos: it’s a chronicle of how the girl-group sound impacted rock ‘n’ roll. Many of the girls came from gospel backgrounds and brought along the soul-holler and hand claps. Phil Spector’s production for the Ronettes not only created the template for the girl-group sound—forceful vocals cut with gunshot snares, pizzicato string stabs, and reverb by the metric ton—but upped the ante for other producers who sought to compete: Brian Wilson, Spector arranger Jack Nitzsche, future Bread founder David Gates, and Motown’s resident genius team Holland-Dozier-Holland. They made symphonic pop and made it loud as hell, a cavernous cavalcade of harps, timpani, and orchestra-size string sections with occasional tracks of audible sobbing. The sound is as timeless as the sentiments of lovelorn teens and still holds up decades after the genre’s final years, represented here by the Lovelites’ 1969 teen-pregnancy classic, “How Can I Tell My Mom and Dad?”

Much as the sound of pop may have changed, the subject matter—love and how to suffer it—is still intrinsic to the soul-
continued on page 26

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Music

continued from page 25

baring teen balladry on the radio today, and performers still rarely write their own material. But as the liner notes to *One Kiss* are careful to point out, some of these girls were more than singers, and the girl-group boom enabled them to establish careers as songwriters: among them were Stevie Wonder collaborator Syreeta Wright, a 17-year-old Mary Wells, and Dusty Springfield's biggest influence, Evie Sands, who has two early singles included in the set.

Sands's 1970 debut album for A&M, *Any Way That You Want Me*, reissued for the first time by UK label Rev-Ola in September, picks up where the girl-group box leaves off, tiptoeing into the



post-Woodstock era. On the cover, clad in a dark brown pantsuit and tunic, she cruises a dirt road on her ten-speed, her long hair flowing, the very picture of the carefree and liberated new woman of the 70s. She's not even looking at the camera, as if to imply that she just happened to cruise into the frame in her special carefree way.

While the album consists mostly of love songs, unlike on *One Kiss* not every phrase begins with the word *baby*, and the portrayals of romance are a bit more grown-up. The man and his love are still elusive, but the girl is asking for more than hand-holding: she also wants friendship. On the album opener, "Crazy Annie," she's even the one doing the leaving.

Any Way That You Want Me sold 500,000 copies, but the bigger deal for Sands was the inclusion of "It's This I Am," which she describes in her liner notes for the reissue as a "thrill and personal milestone . . . the first time I had gotten to record and release a song I had written." The rest of the record consists of songs that had already been made hits by everyone from the Troggs to Jackie Ross, but "It's This I Am" is the most memorable moment; the song has since been covered by Beck and Beth Orton, and Belle & Sebastian are such fans that they backed Sands on two dates on her European comeback tour in 2000.

A whisper-quiet, splendor-in-psych drift of faraway strings, electric piano, and indeterminate twinkling sounds, "It's This I Am" is Sands's haunting response to the firm prescriptions set for her and every other girl singer of the era. It's a liberation anthem, and she asserts her dynamism in a rich voice, sure and melancholy: "I'm that great divide / That never was at all / That's neither large nor heavy / That's neither light or small / It always was and will be / Forever through all time / It's here and there and nowhere / Always is / It's this I am I find." She's defining who she is rather than who she is in relation to some absentee heartbreaker boy. And she is beyond definition. ■

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Books

TRIKSTA: LIFE AND DEATH AND NEW ORLEANS RAP NIK COHN (KNOPF)

The Bounce Remains the Same

Nik Cohn tried to influence New Orleans rap but all he got was this lousy nickname.

By Robert Mentzer

White, British, and pushing 60, Nik Cohn never fit in with New Orleans's rap scene, but for a brief period in the late 90s and early 00s he explored its margins as a journalist, talent scout, and manager. *Triksta*, his book about this period, is partly a memoir, partly a meditation on hip-hop, and partly an exposé of what's under the glittering surface of the music industry. But mostly it's a story about hubris: Cohn's an outsider who tried to harness and influence the scene and failed in spectacular fashion to do either.

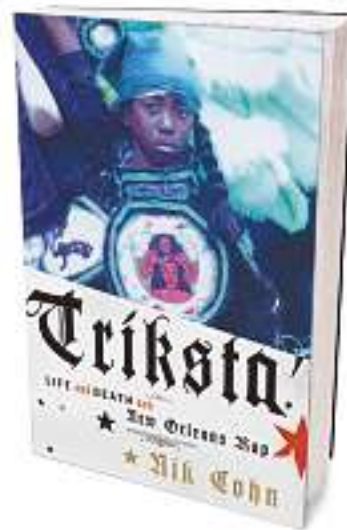
Cohn, the author of 1968's *Awopbopalooop Alopbamboom* (often cited as the first book of rock criticism), has been obsessed with New Orleans since childhood: he writes vividly and enchantingly about

the city and its music, from his early fascination with Jelly Roll Morton to his first visit there in 1972, while on the road with the Who. Though he later moved to New York, he continued to rent a house in New Orleans for several months each year, describing the city as "the lover I could never be free of." And he knows New Orleans's hip-hop scene, which centers on bounce, a club-centric, bump-and-grind style. Cohn puts on his musicologist's hat to explain that bounce is "patterned on the call-and-response of Mardi Gras Indian chants," but another way to put it is that it's hip-hop with the formal rigidity of a square dance, with the MC commanding the crowd—bend over and touch the floor, now turn around,

now throw your hands up.

Cohn knew the music, but he didn't feel it until the 90s, after he was diagnosed with hepatitis C. Hep C's symptoms include insomnia and exhaustion, but to hear Cohn tell it the diagnosis forced him to live his life in a new, reenergized way. So he catches a parade float in New Orleans blasting a bounce track, Magnolia Shorty's "Monkey on tha Dick," and it connects. "The effect was baptismal," he writes.

Cohn's initial research leads him to Earl Mackie, a Jehovah's Witness whose label, Take Fo' Records, specializes in sex raps. (Mackie's faith prevents him from releasing records advocating violence, but he believes sex is an acceptable theme. "It beats



killing people," he says.) Cohn brokers a major-label deal for one of Mackie's artists, Choppa, and is initially granted a budget of \$250,000 from Warner Brothers to make an album. "I would select producers," he writes, "provide song ideas, hire guest artists and singers and live musicians as required,

and try to keep Choppa's nose to the grindstone." He even writes lyrics: "Bend it over, catch the wall / Wobble wobble for me."

It's not giving away a significant plot point to say that the deal eventually falls through and Choppa defects to Master P's New No Limit Records. Bounce insiders bristle at his attempts to turn a regional genre into a national success. One producer all but calls Cohn a carpetbagger, and Choppa is deaf to Cohn's talk about broader career strategies. "They love me all over," Choppa tells him. "Baton Rouge, Shreveport, Lafayette. Everywhere."

Triksta is full of interactions like this, where Cohn and the artists seem to be talking past **continued on page 28**

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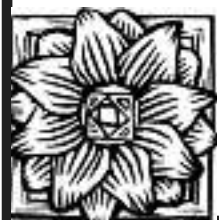
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Books

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each other. Bounce's rules are inflexible, and Cohn's ideas simply don't match up with his artists'. Cohn wants an ode to independent women and single mothers, but Choppa just wants another remix of his familiar hit, "Choppa Style." Cohn leaves a voice mail for producer Supa Dave suggesting a change to a bass line, and the message gets played in the studio to riotous laughter. Choppa nicknames Cohn "Trikssta" during a pot-fueled studio session, after first calling him "Nik da Trik." Neither name is exactly affectionate.

Trikssta is constructed in part from pieces Cohn wrote

for *Granta*, the *Guardian Weekend* magazine, and British *GQ*, and its seams occasionally show—the chronology is scrambled, and the stories of many characters are confined to a single chapter. But the book has a compelling theme in Cohn's relationship to New Orleans as well as his constant grappling with race, particularly race in pop music from the earliest days of rock 'n' roll to the present. He worries that his obsession with black musicians has "some taint of idealization, the flip side of condescension," and that sort of candor keeps *Trikssta* from becoming a work of unintentional comedy.

Cohn's in his element when he's looking closely at hip-hop's allure, especially how and why it titillates white audiences. He's conflicted about gangsta rap and devotes numerous pages to his love-hate relationship with it, but for Cohn the hedonism of bounce accurately reflects a very New Orleans worldview: "Fantasy, braggadocio, myth—these weren't just fancy words for lying, but a sort of art. . . . That was how I came to think of New Orleans: my city of beautiful lies."

Trikssta was written and printed before Hurricane Katrina, and it's hard to read it now as anything other than

a kind of memorial. Certain passages have an eerie premonitory tone, as when the mother of once bounce producer describes the decay of her neighborhood: "Now there was nothing left, just wickedness and crime, and God was mocked. . . . But he would not be mocked forever, no, God always had the last word."

Katrina also reveals just how difficult a task Cohn created for himself: even the hurricane couldn't rewrite the rules of New Orleans hip-hop. Rapper and Cash Money Records president Lil' Wayne, who was raised in New Orleans, recently released *Tha Carter II* (Cash Money/Universal), which

contains not one reference to Katrina. He had no interest in pursuing new subject matter, he recently told the *New York Times*. "When I get behind the mike, I got a whole 'nother mind frame," he said. "I rap about what they wanna hear." Master P recently addressed the disaster by releasing *Hurricane Katrina—We Gon' Bounce Back* (Gutter Music), an album by bounce supergroup the 504 Boyz, but most of the tracks wouldn't sound out of place on any of No Limit's late-90s releases. Resilience is at the heart of bounce—*Trikssta* ends when Cohn gives up the rap game, but the game keeps right on going. **B**



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Books

THE RIDDLE OF THE TRAVELING SKULL HARRY STEPHEN KEELER (MCSWEENEY'S BOOKS)

The Case of the Lost Logorrhic

McSweeney's brings local mystery stylist Harry Stephen Keeler back into print.

By John Marr

Between 1924 and 1953 Chicago native Harry Stephen Keeler published about 50 of the most exuberantly odd mysteries ever written. Set in a seemingly alternate universe thick with eccentrics—and exclamation points—Keeler's novels feature a dozen or more disparate plot strands woven together through an astonishing agglomeration of weird wills, lunatic laws, crackpot contracts, idiotic oaths, and some of the most outrageously beautiful, layered coincidences ever put to paper. The *New York Times* could but marvel, of one forgotten title, "You cannot possibly dream of anything half so bizarre as the yarn Mr. Keeler has strung together."

Although he enjoyed moderate commercial success early in his career—one of his books was the basis for a Bela Lugosi film, *The Mysterious Mr. Wong*—Keeler was long out of print when he died in 1967. But after his death, a small cult began scouring used-book stores for titles like *The Skull of the Waltzing Clown* and *The Mystery of the Fiddling*

Cracksman. Articles celebrating his demented aesthetic began to appear in publications ranging from the *Journal of Popular Culture* to the *New Republic*, and his fame started to grow. This winter McSweeney's Books formally launches a Keeler revival with its reprint of *The Riddle of the Traveling Skull*, originally published in 1934. It's the first Keeler to see print in America in more than 50 years.

Even the staunchest fan will admit that Keeler is not for everyone. Consider this typical sentence, from the first chapter of *The Riddle*:

"For it must be remembered that at the time I knew quite nothing, naturally, concerning Milo Payne, the mysterious Cockney talking Englishman with the checkered long-beaked Sherlockholmsian cap; nor of the latter's 'Barr Bag' which was as like my own bag as one Milwaukee wienerwurst is like another; nor of Legga, the Human Spider, with her four legs and six arms; nor of Ichabod Chang, ex-convict, and son of Don Chang; nor of the elu-

sive poetess, Abigail Sprigee; nor of the Great Simon, with his 2163 pearl buttons; nor, of—in short, I then knew quite nothing about anything or anybody involved in the affair of which I now became a part, unless perchance it were my Nemesis, Sophie Kratzenschneiderwumpel or 'Suing Sophie!'"

This is the sort of prose that led one reviewer to accuse him of writing in Choctaw. But if you can see a certain loopy beauty in the ornate syntax and rampant semicolons; if you can sense the touch of a genius in the creation of Legga the Human Spider and the Great Simon; or if you're just wondering how the hell it can all come together coherently, Keeler is a sublime pleasure.

The Riddle of the Traveling Skull opens with narrator Clay Calthorpe returning home to Chicago from a business trip to Asia. He's worried about a potential entanglement with "Suing Sophie," a middle-aged missionary who files breach-of-promise suits against every man who crosses her path. However, she's soon relegated to the back burn-



er when Clay opens his bag and finds inside, instead of his toiletries, a trepanned skull.

He quickly deduces that he must have switched bags with a clergyman on a Broadway street-car. However, this is no ordinary trepanned skull—and in short order Clay is mugged and relieved of the object by a mysterious Chinese man, inexplicably jilted by his fiancée, and inadvertently involved in blackmail directed against his employer and potential father-in-law, Roger Pelton.

To untangle the mystery, Clay sets out on an odyssey through

Keeler's beloved "London of the West"—a thoroughly skewed Chicago. One memorable sequence finds him hunting for clues in a cemetery dedicated to circus freaks. He finally determines that the skull belongs to a man Pelton murdered 20 years ago. The skull contains incontrovertible evidence of Pelton's guilt and is now in the hands of a blackmailer intent on his ruin. But after spotting the "Sherlockholmsian" hat and a ventriloquist's dummy outfitted as a cockney costermonger in Pelton's butler's room, Clay is prepared to unmask the blackmailer.

At this point, two-thirds of the way through the book, the publisher issues a "Challenge to the Reader." An insert announces, "Stop! At this point all the necessary clues have been presented to make it possible for you to determine the identity of the blackmailer. CAN YOU DO IT?"

Blanks are helpfully provided for the reader to write down a guess, but the answer is: of course not. The solution to a

continued on page 31

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Letters

continued on from page 3

cial comic section. It will be popular in comics and cartooning circles, and the only ad revenue there is if there's an arrangement with the holders of the print advertising on the page of ads included in the block to shell out a little extra based on downloads. In this case, yes, the Web would not be making any money for the *Reader*.

Now past the issue of whether bloggers prevent money from flowing to the print media or actually help it, there's the issue of whether online journalists can do anything besides link to print sources (and help the revenues of the print

sources who have an online revenue model). Is there original journalistic content online? Of course. Check out Chicagoist.com. While they link to some print-originated material, they do plenty of original work in areas print publications gloss over.

Chicagodailynews.org should be up and running before too long and will be specializing in original material. You can hardly be online for half an hour without accidentally tripping over political commentary. Liberal, conservative—whatever—the commentary is out there. Print columnists expanding their output online, people who are online only. The value of the

political commentator is determined by the individual reader, not the editor, and certainly not by whether the commentator's words are on paper or a screen. It is freedom of what you want to read.

Newspapers and magazines have revenue models that are based primarily on advertising. Alternative weeklies like the *Reader* are based exclusively on advertising. Web pages are based primarily on advertising, with a few entering into the realm of subscription and another set reaping the benefits of selling merchandise that complements their product and/or topic area. The product is not so different; the medium the prod-

uct is distributed in is a little different. The Internet is also a much more inclusive and robust distribution system.

I hope Mr. Lenehan can quit wailing like an infant with soiled diapers and learn about the different types of ways to distribute a news story and to get a check for it. The model is changing, and you can either adapt or go have a drink with those nice young men from the buggy-whip factory.

Todd Allen

Adjunct professor of e-business
Columbia College

Michael Lenehan replies:

Over here at the Buggy Whip Gazette we are very grateful to

Professor Allen for so patiently sharing his e-business expertise, particularly in the area of advertising, a subject we know very little about. I fear, however, that my humble attempt at humor has eluded him in a variety of ways, of which I'd like to address just one: With capital letters and a great deal of condescension, Mr. Allen informs us that blogs provide FREE ADVERTISING for newspapers and generate traffic for their Web sites. In his eagerness to deliver a lecture, he seems to have completely missed my point about the Wonkette item in question, which was precisely that it did neither. Forgive me for repeating myself, but Wonkette linked to Sploid, a sibling blog, and to a page on Yahoo News. The item made no mention of the *Houston Chronicle*, which originated the story, or the AP, which delivered it to Yahoo.

Damn the Health Taliban

After reading Ben Joravsky's piece on Chicago's smoking ban [The Works, December 30], I found it odd that he fails to mention the fact that "second-hand smoke" damage itself is about as proven as "intelligent design." Or the fact that despite humanity being aware of possible damage from inhaling smoke since the first caveman tried building a fire within the cave, not to mention the fact that citizens have many choices of places to go that don't allow smoking, some people feel Big Mother needs to step in and form the Health Taliban.

But since the conservatives have their own pseudoscience justifying the War on Drug Users, liberals need some too, evidently.

John Biederman

DailyLimerick.net

Ben Joravsky replies:

My point was that the city started with the assumption that secondhand smoke is dangerous then did nothing about it.

Swift Justice

Dear Michael [Lenehan],

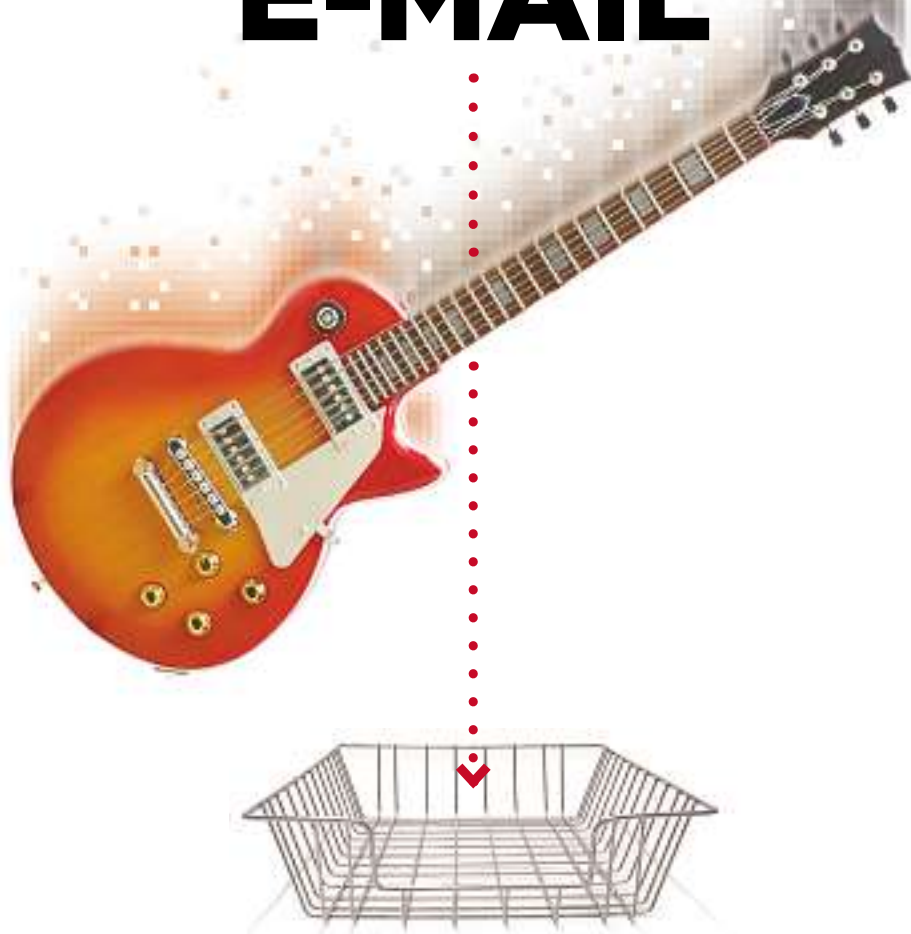
I enjoyed your piece in the latest *Reader* ["A Year Without Journalism," December 30], and your modest proposal for a year's sabbatical for journalists. As I'm sure Swift would've agreed, perhaps those daughters (and sons) of reporters and writers who are unsuitable for lives of prostitution can be eaten.

Fred Donini-Lenhoff

River Forest

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Books

continued from page 29

Keeler mystery is impossible to divine from mere clues, and Keeler had a penchant for introducing twist upon turn upon complication right up to the final page. Clay's impeccably reasoned solution quickly crumbles when the truth comes out; the final answer involves so many unlikely coincidences and almost avant-garde literary devices (including four characters who all turn out to be the same person) that it's almost postmodern.

It's not too surprising that this sort of tomfoolery didn't play too well in post-World War II America. As cold war paranoia set in, mysteries grew increasingly straight and serious and the popularity of hard-boiled writers like Mickey Spillane and Erle Stanley Gardner skyrocketed. Even Ellery Queen swapped his pince-nez for a psychology textbook. Against this buttoned-down backdrop—when a “cult writer” meant someone like Kafka—Keeler must have appeared hopelessly screwy, if not downright un-American. But with the line between high and low culture now so intractably blurred, his time may have finally come. **B**

Ink Well by Ben Tausig

Subscription Descriptions

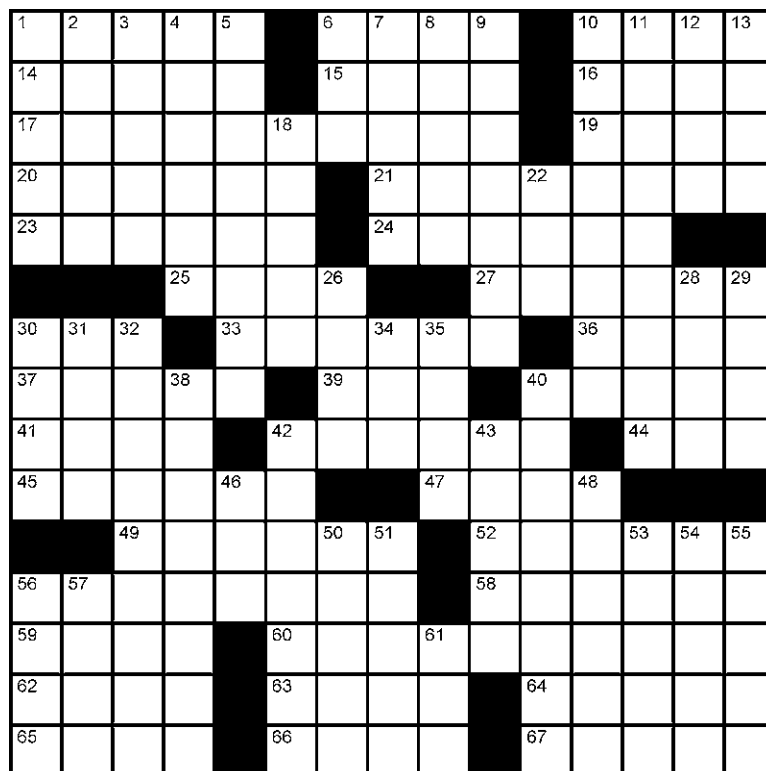
ACROSS

- 1. “No problemo!”
- 6. Quarters in college
- 10. Genghis or Chaka
- 14. “___ a drink . . .”
- 15. Trice of hip-hop
- 16. Reprehensible
- 17. Driving instructor?
- 19. Premade waffle option
- 20. Riffs
- 21. <
- 23. Take down the aisle, in a way
- 24. Really
- 25. Not busy
- 27. More sore
- 30. Chi. summer hours
- 33. Add slack
- 36. Plus-size model
- 37. Stand-up responses
- 39. What a swish misses
- 40. False start?
- 41. Early garden

- 42. Arbiter who calls strikes
- 44. Puncture sound
- 45. Buckle up
- 47. Four: prefix
- 49. Greenpeace target, at times
- 52. Desisted
- 56. Mr. or Ms. Right
- 58. Hit the big time
- 59. Smart
- 60. Crepe paper?
- 62. Ancient South American empire
- 63. Land of limericks
- 64. Halloween 2005 nominee
- 65. Stern's opposite
- 66. Went platinum, perhaps, but probably not gold
- 67. Phone company that merged with Bell Atlantic in 1996

DOWN

- 1. Cuban, e.g.
- 2. Battery terminal
- 3. Carter and Gwyn
- 4. Flouts
- 5. Nuts
- 6. One may lead the blind
- 7. Division symbols
- 8. Out of bed
- 9. Seinfeld, notably
- 10. Bitches
- 11. Joint publication?
- 12. Seaweed, e.g.
- 13. Dodge model
- 18. Playground retort
- 22. Pouch
- 26. Apple problem
- 28. Big Aussie birds
- 29. Bolsheviks
- 30. Child, notably



- 31. Subversive art movement
- 32. Rap sheet?
- 34. Nurse
- 35. Give off
- 38. Civil War battleground
- 40. Perpetual child
- 42. Like a model in a life-drawing class
- 43. Play the highlight reel
- 46. Wing
- 48. Nearly never
- 50. Type of tower
- 51. Bottled spirit
- 53. Protest strategy
- 54. Online party-planning resource
- 55. Dry out, so to speak
- 56. “Get ___!”
- 57. Litter's littlest
- 61. Not to mention

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