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The Month In: Out Music

The Month In by Dominique Leone

Welcome to my new column. Unfortunately, I'm not quite sure what it should be called, and the exact kind of music I'll cover. How's that for preparedness? Nevertheless, there is so much great music happening right now, I badgered the P4k powers-that-be into letting me write about some of it here. And though I have a notion of what "out" music is, in truth, I'm still trying to figure out a basic definition. My best ideas are as follows:

* "Out" music is all the stuff that isn't "in". Hope that helps. It's about as specific as I can be before everything gets messy. The problem is not only that defining things like "in" and "out," even in just musical terms, or rock music terms, or even independent rock music terms, is a losing game. I know what's popular, and I know what tends to be written about in other music publications, and I also know that there are few places I can go to read about what I (think I'll) like. But there aren't any hard and fast rules about what constitutes, say, "mainstream" popular music, and what doesn't. See Pitchfork's top record of 2006, for example.

Theoretically, it's possible to research exactly what people are buying and infer from the numbers what is "in," but that assumes that people a) Are buying records for all the same reasons, b) Are buying the things they actually like most (as opposed to, say, downloading them), and c) That anyone would actually attest that the records with the most sales are the records with the most "worth." And while I'm definitely not going to use this column to debate age-old music crit subjects like "best vs favorite" or "popular vs meaningful," there is something to the notion that discerning a little about what "mainstream" music consumer culture buys can help to understand why [insert fucked up noise band here] isn't in the mainstream. Note: I also don't want to confuse this stuff with "outsider art"; some of the music I write about probably would fit into that category (perhaps R. Stevie Moore, for example), but unlike outsider art, my "out" musicians aren't required to have a conscious stance that places them at odds with mainstream culture. They just turn out that way.

With that said, my other idea is:

* "Out" music is the kind of music I listen to. I'll write about that.

If it isn't already clear, this kind of music is hard for me to define. Stylistically, "out" music is all over the map; this makes sense when you consider that the musicians making the stuff are also all over the place, with any number of lifestyles, financial securities (or lack thereof), educational histories, recording media, intentions, etc. Some of these musicians have been going at it for decades, while others might only have a few MySpace friends to their name. Some of them are masters of their instruments, while others make gorgeous noise exploiting the fact that they aren't doing anything "right". I'm not necessarily sure there is common musical ground between a lot of "out" music-- though that in and of itself could be considered commonality, I suppose (which makes them good Democrats!).

In any case, the following are records from 2006 that fit "out" to a tee-- and in all but one case weren't already covered on Pitchfork. I've grouped them, but needless to say, that doesn't necessarily mean they're coming from "scenes."

I Heard It On MySpace **Amy Kohn: I'm in Crinoline** [NuNoise] - Ah, MySpace: Promoter of the unpromotable; exploiter of the desperately exploitable. Nevertheless, I took the plunge in 2006, and fell prey to hundreds of people who wanted to be my friend and invite me to CD release parties in Michigan. However, wade through (or into) the porn spam and you'll occasionally find some **great music -- including, perhaps, Amy Kohn's debut I'm in Crinoline, a jazz-pop-composer's record fit for people who think Steve Reich should be writing showtunes.** I'll play my obscure card by saying it actually reminds me most of personal heroes Annette Peacock (check her I'm the One from 1972 for maximum out-jazz soul-pop) and the slept-on John Greaves/Peter Blegvad/Lisa Herman masterpiece Kew.Rhone from 1977, both of which answer the question, "What would jazz sound like if it was an excuse to write complex pop songs with baroque counterpoint?" **In any case, check this record. Kohn's voice is as idiosyncratic as they come (which is probably why nobody's calling her the next Norah Jones yet), but of course, that's all part of the fun.**