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Best of 2008: 10 Albums, 10 Downloads, 8 Processes

[[December 31, 2008](#) / Department: [reports/essays](#)]

By [Marc Weidenbaum](#)

Three lists this year — two of highly recommended music (one each of 10 commercial full-length recordings and of 10 freely downloadable recordings), and one of 8 cultural processes that came into their own in 2008.

Picking favorites, making lists, is something an individual either is drawn to, or is loathe to participate in. I fall into the latter camp, and each year when I select 10 albums, I do so knowing — and feeling it's necessary, yet again, to couch the list in a deep, cushioning bed of caveats — that another set of 10 albums, another 10 sets of 10 albums, could bring just as much pleasure, and reward just as much curiosity, as those listed here.

In my experience, a given list is valuable primarily as a chore, a chore that provides an impetus for reflection. The process is a kind of practice. And the end result is less important to me than is the time and effort required to produce it — the effort involves looking back at past posts and unpublished notes, at correspondence, as well as at the writings of friends, colleagues, and other writers and musicians, and flipping through stacks of recordings, both physical and virtual. But that's exactly the sort of effort that I don't think I could exert if I didn't have a goal in sight, and these lists are that goal.

Of course, considering the ever increasing amount of music and sound art being produced, it's also nice to offer up a tidy, if inadequate, window on a given year — a list that can be of use to others, much as their lists are of use to me. And so, presented below, are three such windows, each with sufficient introductory remarks that it's best to just get on with it.

One last comment, though — if anything came into focus as I sorted these items, it was a single, insistent question: *What elevates one drone above another?* Much of the music heard here, from the entirety of Kevin Drumm's aptly named *Imperial Distortion*, to several key moments on the equally appropriately titled *Ghosts* from Nine Inch Nails, to the audio cumulus of Ryonkt, qualifies as a drone. A drone is precisely the sort of sound that is easily dismissible as background noise in our ever more electronically enhanced and mediated society. It is also the artistic territory of a wide range of musicians. The seemingly fungible nature of drones may give the lie to the whole act of distinguishing between (or within) any types music. But the fact of the matter is that for me, personally, these drones — as well the other drone-like music heard here, not to mention the music that is utterly un-drone-like, such as the prickly beats of Alva Noto and the computer-brutalized metal of Drumcorps — were,



together from snippets of a recording of an out-of-breath dog. The rhythm is later repeated on what could be chopsticks tapping out a sketch of the work on a restaurant table. Above it, throughout, fragments of spoken word and gestural acoustic guitar hover like filigrees and decorations (MP3).

[Downstream: November 5, 2008](#)

3. Live Digitally Processed Jazz Performance:

The Australian trio **Roam the Hello Clouds** works a laptop into the mix. **Lawrence Pike** on drums and **Phil Slater** on trumpet collaborate with their third member, **Dave Miller**, who is billed with laptop, and whose primary sound sources are the live performances by Pike and Slater, which he augments in real time. The scenario recalls the role of Brian Eno during the early stages of Roxy Music, when he was, among other things, emphasizing the use of the mixing board itself as a part of the creative process. The result, as evidenced by a lengthy performance posted courtesy of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation National Radio show Sound Quality, brings to mind everything from late-1960s Miles Davis to the more recent digitally augmented work of Nils Petter Molvåg. Miller's efforts are both subtle and trenchant. They're inherent to the playing, but generally linger in the background. For example, about 14 minutes into the hour-and-a-half Sound Quality posting, an extended tone can be heard in the background, as if a note played by Slater had been plucked from thin air and then magically wrapped around the trio like a blanket, suggesting an impossible effort at circular breathing, as if Rhasaan Roland Kirk were reborn as an ambient guru (MP3).

[Downstream: October 22, 2008](#)



4. Massive Birdsong Megamix: Back in May, San Francisco-based musician **Wobbly** (aka **Jon Leidecker**) filled the gaps between acts at a concert headlined by krautrock legends Cluster with several DJ sets, two of which he has posted at his website, detritus.net/wobbly, for free download. Wobbly took as his theme for one of them (titled "Pastoral"), as he describes it, "music that modelled or sampled birdsong or insect calls, from the 50's to present day," which traces from the Barrons (composers of the *Forbidden Planet* soundtrack), through David Tudor, on to Wendy Carlos, up through Florian Hecker and Christina Kubisch and beyond. Thoughtfully, he's also provided not only a set list, but one with detailed time

codes, so listeners can follow along — or birdwatch, as it were (MP3).

[Downstream: September 23, 2008](#)

5. Computer-Mediated Metal: The act **Drumcorps** (aka **Aaron Spectre**) has long been a Disquiet Downstream favorite for his having located the exact sonic space where chaotically implemented digital noise is indistinguishable from the whiplash riffage of metal bands like Slayer. Each of the three songs on the *Altered Beast* EP is a technologically enabled dissection and reanimation of death metal by the San Francisco-based band **Animosity**, inserting stop'n'start instances, warping noise into the ether, and emphasizing the pummel. (Available as Zipped archives at wearemanalive.com/abdownload. The EP was also released on limited-edition vinyl



pressings of wildly varying color combinations.)

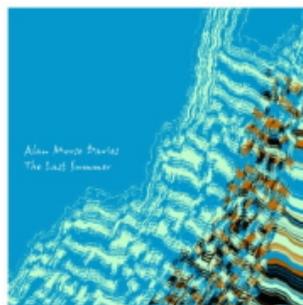
[Downstream: August 29, 2008](#)



6. A Sky Full of Audio Bliss: The slowly circulating drones of “Gray Sky,” a free download by **Ryonkt**, supply 17 minutes of audio bliss. Layers of sound appear occasionally with some suddenness, only to be

absorbed immediately into the cloud-like whole. Brief pulses surface above the bellows-like sine waves, but there’s never enough of a pattern to them to approximate or otherwise suggest a proper melodic structure; they’re more like accent marks than notes, mere glints on the sonic windshield. This is a beautiful track, far more detailed than might initially appear to be the case. It’s likewise more dynamic: there are moments when sounds quickly spiral off into the distance, and when swells of tone play with your ear drums. There is modulation down and up, and a quieting toward the end that provides a natural, soothing close ([MP3](#)).

[Downstream: July 15, 2008](#)



7. Remixed 78-RPM Recordings: We know what **Alan Morse Davies** did to construct *The Last Summer*. The brief liner note on the project’s home page states it plainly enough: “An album of manipulated recordings from 78RPM records recorded between 1905 and 1931.” He’s taken outmoded recordings of once popular music and transformed them, courtesy of the creative license inherent in the public domain, into his own deeply felt renditions. The shortest of the three tracks, a

version of the Debussy favorite “Claire de Lune,” is extended to over 17 minutes, at which point it is almost pure choral gossamer; each of the other two, “The Last Rose of Summer” and a rousing “Ave Maria,” clock in at over 23 minutes. It’s a testament to Davies’s approach that he doesn’t get hung up on the needle-in-the-groove clicks or dusty residue of the 78s. He doesn’t need to reproduce the rough surface texture of the original medium in order to telegraph to today’s listeners that this stuff is, plain and simple, old. His versions don’t merely extend the content of the originals until that material is ready to evaporate into thin air; they amplify both the richly melodious songs that were a dominant style of that period, and the archaic echoes inherent in that time’s sonic-reproduction technology. (Get the full set at [archive.org](#).)

[Downstream: July 7, 2008](#)

8. Transformed Field Recordings: Sounds sourced from the real world and transformed into something either unreal or hyperreal serve as the foundation of a new compilation from the [furthernoise.org](#) netlabel. It is titled *Explorations in Sound, Vol 3: Music of Sound* and was curated by Roger Mills. Field recordings subjected here to digital modifications include rubber bands (yanked and flicked into numerous variations by **Solange Kershaw**), the electric hum of a lamppost