

CDs of the Year 2008

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2008 was another bumper year for music of all kinds in Leeds, with no end in sight to the succession of unique and creative bands and artists playing around the city. Established bands made it to their second full releases (iForward, Russia!, although 'Life Processes' may turn out to be their last, and Bilge Pump, 'Rupert the Sky' arriving a mere six years after their debut, to name but two) or disintegrated altogether (This Et Al). If anyone thought that Leeds itself would disintegrate as a creative seedbed following the Kaiser Chiefs meteoric rise, they were clearly mistaken. The Kaiser's are now a significant player in the Wide World of Pop and the fact that they're from Leeds is probably only of limited significance to most of the people who consume their finely crafted pop songs.

The underlying significance of all this continued activity is that Leeds could now be said to possess a mature creative milieu in which its musical practitioners operate. This means that even when a band tipped for success like Mother Vulpine falls apart, two bands spring up in its place (Dinosaur Pile Up and Pulled Apart By Horses) who almost instantly start to make waves of their own. Promoters are

flourishing (Stench of Muscle and Room237 alongside established outfits like On the Bone and Brainwash) and continue to release fantastic compilations that amply display the talent available in Leeds. But they also show that the promoters are firmly plugged into a national network of like minded souls, thus ensuring the Leeds scene is unlikely to become insular and eventually run out of steam. Local labels (On the Bone, again, and Bad Sneakers to name but two) are now well into a release schedule that boasts quality and variety in equal measure. Phew.

So, in picking Plastic Fuzz's 'Dots' as the Leeds CD of the year, I realise I'm turning away to some extent from the established organisations and personalities mentioned already. Plastic Fuzz is the defiantly independent creation of Mark Shahid, who recorded every instrument and sang (almost) every word of his 100 song, 4 hour, 4 CD set creation in his home studio over a two year period, released it in an elaborately designed case and built a website to support it.

It was only after he'd released it that he thought about how he could present the whole thing in a live setting, and he's spent 2008 trying various methods of doing just that. Shahid is well aware he's splurged out as many songs in one huge burst as it takes some artists entire careers to accumulate, but he doesn't care. The songs on 'Dots' cover a huge range

of styles and include almost every instrument known to man, but the most astonishing thing about the whole thing is that the quality of the songs is, quite unbelievably, extremely high with hardly anything that could be fairly described as filler. You need to own 'Dots'. It will take you months to listen to it all properly, but if you have any appreciation at all for idiosyncratic left field pop, you'll end up loving too.

Nationally, the record industry continues to lurch blindly around trying to keep up with the swift running rivers of creativity, accessibility and networking that run through the streets and alleys of non corporate Britain. In a nutshell, the industry is simply too big and disconnected from the reasons why people bother to play music or listen to it in anything other than the passive spoon feeding consumerist ways it can now only deal in. The music industry will always be about making money, but they'd do a better job if they actually conducted their business like they had any respect for or understanding of the product they sell. So, it's perhaps fitting that overall the best CD of the year by far was Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds' 'Dig!!! Lazarus, Dig!!!'. In truth, Cave was on the verge of being a spent force in 2006. His songs were becoming enervated and morose, The bloated Bad Seeds floundering around in an increasingly predictable stylistic blind alley. Cue the departure of Blixa Bargeld and the convening of the stripped down wildness of the Grinderman sessions and, hey presto, Cave produces his best collection of songs since 'Let Love In' in 1994 and the Bad Seeds seem to have spirited up some of the frenzied power of Cave's first band, The Birthday Party. Even the laid back songs have a grumbling impatience to them, while "We Call Upon the Author to Explain" has Cave babbling some kind of scabrous evangelical sermon. And in an age where artists load their "best" songs at the beginning of a CD so that they have some chance of being heard before the listeners attention span falters and moves on to something else, it says a lot when one of the best songs Cave has ever written, "More News From Nowhere", is the last song you hear. For the first time in years, I really cannot wait for the next Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds recording.....

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<http://www.myspace.com/plasticfuzz>

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