The Top Elephant Six Albums

With the reunion and rigid touring schedule of indie giants, Neutral Milk Hotel in addition to the recent release of Circulatory System’s *Mosaics with Mosaics*, the Elephant 6 collective has returned from the locked bedrooms of yesteryear reestablishing themselves as pioneers in pop mastery and psychedelia. Approaching an entire catalogue both distinctive to their primary songwriters and further perfected by the contributions of their fellow men and women, the task of picking my top ten Elephant 6 albums was daunting. While my familiarity with this grandiose clustering of artists began with frontrunners Neutral Milk Hotel, like any avid music listener, I quickly shifted to the deep cuts and rare gems, falling hard for the polished differences between these friends and contemporaries. My infatuation with these songs has withstood long past temporary placeholders scattered amongst mix CD’s and will stand firm that often times the past is the best of possible jumping off points.

The albums that follow represent the hooks that kept me coming back for more with apologies to Elf Power, The High Water Marks, The Minders, The Sunshine Fix, The Ladybug Transistor and many, many others.

10. *010 –* Ulysses

“Inside of pissed of prostitutes, I try to get my mind off you,” Robert Schneider sings on “Push You Away” the opening track to Ulysses’ only release. Recorded in mono and originally intended as a demo, 2004’s *010* is a uniquely satisfying alternative to Schneider’s main efforts in The Apples in Stereo. Ten songs in just over thirty minutes, Ulysses holds true to the joys associated with any side project. Here is a band playing with lyrical quality and subtext often lost on the casual listener. There’s a lot of heartbreak mixed in, although the good comes only after these same tunes get stuck in your head for the duration. *010* is the television spinoff that didn’t break through pilot season, but there’s still plenty of zest and gusto before the laugh track.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XGnJZGfMUw

9. *Everything is Green* – The Essex Green

Are the sixties really dead and gone? Just listen to “Primrose” from The Essex Green’s 1999 debut and see if there’s any remaining doubt in the back of your head. From the charismatic keyboards to the eventual crescendo, *Everything is Green* begins with a bang, but doesn’t slack off or border on betrayal to their long departed kin from the summer of love. The harmonic bliss in cuts like “The Playground” and title track “Everything is Green” flow over the listener like a breeze without allergens. The Essex Green are a firmly-rooted folky throwback with sensitivity and distinction to make even the skeptical listener second-guess that stray look across the playing fields from the girl with flowers in her hair.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuF7V-jvDTg

8. *Circulatory System* – Circulatory System

From the ashes of Olivia Tremor Control came Circulatory System, and like the right kind of movie sequel, all of the elements coalesced. This 2001 self-titled debut is a moody romp of sound and structure, diving deep into jagged harmonics and sweeping tones centered in Will Cullen Hart’s songwriting. The final product is an eager combination of old friends tweaking their good chords, presenting enough individual quarks to warrant multiple listens. Beginning with the opening pulse of “Yesterday’s World” to the unsettled swirl of songs like “Outside Blasts” and “Inside Blasts,” the truth is right in the track listing. It really is a lovely universe.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPcFLd2CAKg

7. *Are You Sleepy?* – The Gerbils

The lo-fi rock from Scott Spillane’s debut with The Gerbils hits on many levels. Its pure sonic clang and simplistic pop hooks brings back the comforts of basement shows and the inevitable static between tracks. 1998’s *Are You Sleepy?* stands out most in the lasting quality of its songs. “Is She Fiona” and “Fluid” are upbeat while still somber. The closing track, “Grin” features a mock southern preacher’s twang repeating the words as if to stress their near spiritual importance. While lyrically “Crayon Box” will always be enough to tug away at your heartstrings. “Even though I know that Sebadoh is still your favorite band.” Well, duh.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MpyPm8MR-o

6. *The Sunlandic Twins* – Of Montreal

At last, something to dance to. Kevin Barnes’ Of Montreal has evolved significantly from their earlier indie pop efforts to the all-encompassing funk-induced hysteria that followed. *The Sunlandic Twins* was that great in-between party album that not many collegiate cohorts picked up on as I’d initially hoped in 2005. The songs are all there, from the jagged rumble of its opener “Requiem For O.M.M.2” to the sly bassline of “Wraith Pinned to the Mist and Other Games.” Lyrically, Barnes lassos stars with cryptically dreamy jolts bordering the unknown spaces of pop’s departed disco brothers. “Let’s pretend we don’t exist/Let’s pretend we’re in Antarctica.” If only it were that easy sometimes.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8cCPH1qnYI

5. *The Coast is Never Clear* – Beulah

Abundant arrangements, well-crafted nods to a noisier past and equally stunning songwriting, Beulah’s third album has all the qualities to make it a classic. Released on September 11th, 2001, *The Coast is Never Clear* maintains a far more positive outlook than its unfortunate timing. Take “Silver Lining” for example, an upbeat horn-induced mesh that declares “Punk rock was my first girl.” Like many of their fellow Elephant 6 practitioners, Beulah was a great band with an individuality and sound influenced by, but never directly derivative of their shared tastes. Dig the *69 Love Songs* reference in “Popular Mechanics for Lovers”.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGA5\_4e7e5E

4. *Velocity of Sound* – The Apples in Stereo

The Apples fifth studio album is a personal favorite in that it’s been a constant source for mixtape songs and positivity since my senior year of high school. Not quite so psychedelic as *Fun Trick Noisemaker* or *The Discovery of the World Inside the Moon*e, what *Velocity* lacks in whimsical production tricks, it makes up for in sheer rock hits. “Please” could open the greatest film about misinterpreted puppy love behind the bleachers, while the infectious pop of “Do You Understand” and “Baroque” would maintain these same themes leading to the inevitable heartbreak and drug-induced finale. If only they made ‘em like they used to.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwf9G-ZH1Mk

3. *Music Tapes for Clouds and Tornadoes* – The Music Tapes

This album sounds like it was discovered in a time capsule two hundred year in the future or is that the past? Recorded with antique methods over nine years, Julian Koster’s *Music Tapes for Clouds and Tornadoes* is a weighty, all-fulfilling experience of unbridled wonder. The singing-saw is but one of many key elements to the bigger picture ensemble plucking away at the ear drums, presenting dreamy imagery and heart-wrenching depth. “The ocean is falling out of the sky,” Koster croons on “Song for Ocean Falling;” the kind of tune meant for the pure solitude of bedroom listening along with the equally melancholy “Manifest Destiny”. Don’t worry, though. “The Minister of Longitude” has enough pluck to bring everyone back to the living room for cocktails.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jpw5\_A7s6lM

2. *Black Foliage: Animation Music Volume One* – The Olivia Tremor Control

“In the blink of an eye, you get several meanings”. No statement better sums up the combined efforts of the Elephant 6 collective, *Black Foliage* representing one cornerstone of their accomplishments. Formed by Will Cullen Hart, Jeff Magnum and the late Bill Doss, The Olivia Tremor Control was more than simply a band of old friends trying something new. They brought together the best musical and textual elements to create an ample explosion of melody and noise with just the right dash of humanity thrown in. The ending of “Hideaway” could very well be an outtake from the Beach Boys’ *Smile*. “A New Day” and “Mystery” are kindred pop earthquakes distorting the RICTOR scale. “I Have Been Floated,” *Black Foilage*’s best track has it all and then some; need I even mention the Jeff Magnum solo before the strings that follow?

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6hkVXpQYYg

1. *In The Aeroplane Over The Sea –* Neutral Milk Hotel

No surprise here. While *Everything Is* and *On Avery Island* are both worthy of any top ten, the impact of *Aeroplane* is unparalleled. Jeff Magnum’s songwriting paired with the warm arrangements and passions of his Elephant 6 comrades makes this record the bee’s knees. From start to finish, *Aeroplane* captivates and churns away at the conventional with a whirlwind of sound, lyrical depths and sentimental confusion even after multiple listens. These aren’t just songs, this is a record meant to be heard from start to finish, as if “Two Headed Boy Part 2” wasn’t enough of a giveaway. Above all else, *Aeroplane* is a testament to what friends can do in a room together, how they can help one vision somehow skyrocket above the rest to the point where it becomes selfless. This is no longer just for them. It’s for everybody.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLaFLztnL84