

2008: THE YEAR IN MUSIC: URBAN/JAZZ

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Pop & Jazz Critic

It's been a long time since a hip-hop album was my top pick – a decade, actually, since *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Then, the draw was girl power, reggae undertones and her middle-class oeuvre.

The attraction this time couldn't be more different.

For a while, my heart belonged to Lil Wayne's *Tha Carter III*; but enjoyable as it is, the eight-Grammy contender is too loose and rambling, and not intellectually stimulating enough for the long haul.



Turns out T.I.'s *Paper Trail* is the champ. There isn't a weak track on this album; and some – "Swagger Like Us," "No Matter What" – are destined to be classics.

Though his drug dealer-to-rapper/actor trajectory is worlds from mine, I found common ground with the underdog tale of perseverance T.I. spins with self-awareness, musical creativity and *savoir faire*. It's like reading a good autobiography.

I'm similarly engaged by Kanye West's *808s & Heartbreak*. Yes, it's indulgent and repetitive, but the rawness, novelty and intimacy make it highly memorable.

Rounding out my top three is Seal's *Soul*. Of this year's retro discs – among them Gerald Alston Sings Sam Cooke, Duffy's *Rockferry* and the Cadillac Records soundtrack – this U.S.-based Brit nailed it best with song selection, production and delivery. Robin Thicke's sultry *Something Else* was a near-tie.

Fresh newcomers like the U.K.'s Estelle and Toronto's Emma-Lee produced stellar efforts (*Shine and Never Just a Dream*). Underrated discs from Beyonce's sister, Solange (*Sol-Angel and the Hadley St. Dreams*); Halle Berry's ex, Eric Benet (*Love and Life*); Toronto up-and-comer Christina Maria with *Stars & Satellites* (a cross between Sarah McLachlan and Rickie Lee Jones); and gospel siblings Mary Mary (*The Sound*) should be heard.

After seeing Usher's album land with a thud, along with Janet Jackson's tour, the Labelle reunion and Kardinal Offishall's sure bet, I can't wait to see how the scheduled '09 comebacks of Eminem, Maxwell and D'Angelo fare.

On the jazz beat, James Carter (*Present Tense*), Sonny Rollins (*Road Shows, Vol. 1*) and **Robin McKelle (*Modern Antique*) impressed**. Runners-up include Willie Nelson & Wynton Marsalis (*Two Men With the Blues*), Molly Johnson (*Lucky*), Kate McGarry (*If Less Is More ... Nothing is Everything*) and Esperanza Spaulding (*Esperanza*).