

Simon Reynolds's Notes on the noughties: The musically fragmented decade

There was such a wide range of quality music made in the noughties that it is hard for critics to agree on which albums had the most impact

I was looking at [Pitchfork's Top 200 Albums of the 2000s](#). And I noticed something strange about the top 10. Now obviously there's a limit to what you can read into a critics' poll. Then again, Pitchfork is one of the few institutions that could honestly be said to be influential, in terms of what it covers and the judgments it makes. Pitchfork both leads and reflects a readership that is substantial yet relatively defined. You might call it "post-indie", which means that Pitchfork is the closest thing the modern era has to NME in the years after punk (when its mindset was definitely "rock" but it had a principled openness to music outside its obvious remit, from reggae to disco, funk, Africa and jazz). The poll's electorate – Pitchfork's staff – are people who spend lots of time listening intensively to a really wide range of music. So it seems unlikely that their collective assessment of what mattered this last decade is devoid of significance. At any rate, for the sake of argument, I shall proceed as though the results mean something.

So what was so intriguingly odd about their [top 10 albums of the noughties](#)? I was immediately struck by the fact that seven of the albums were from 2000 and 2001, with one other record from 2002 and another from 2004. The only album from after the mid-decade point was Panda Bear's *Person Pitch*. Now what significance can be derived from this dense clustering (eight of the ten) of "greatest albums" in the first three years of the decade? You could interpret it two ways: firstly, music deteriorated as the noughties went on, or secondly, it grew harder and harder for people to reach consensus about which groups mattered, what records were important. The first scenario seems unlikely, so I'd have to go with the second. It resonates with how the decade actually felt: diasporic, scenes splintering into sub-scenes, taste bunkers forming, the question "Have you heard X?" increasingly likely to meet a shake of the head or a look of incomprehension.

I wondered if my own take on the decade's top albums would have a similar shape to Pitchfork's, ie. slanted massively to the early years. As it happens, I'd already participated in an equivalent critics' polls organised by Stylus, a webzine that had been Pitchfork's "friendly rival" until it closed down a few years ago but whose writers have reconvened for a special one-off decade-assessing issue ([the results, plus a raft of overview essays, are due in a few weeks' time](#)). Looking at my own choices, I was surprised to see that the top 10 (and indeed the entire 50 albums I picked) were evenly split between the first and second halves of the decade. No decline in quality, according to me, then. But looking close I did notice that my choices from the early years of the noughties were discernibly more consensual, even "middlebrow": Radiohead's *Kid A*, Jay-Z's *The Black Album*, Daft Punk's *Discovery*, the Avalanches' *Since I Left You* (those last four all made the Pitchfork top 10), the Streets' *Original Pirate Material*, Kanye West's *The College Dropout*, Dizzee's *Boy in Da Corner*. Whereas stuff I'd favoured from the second half of the decade seemed noticeably more idiosyncratic: albums from the Ghost Box roster, Black Moth Super Rainbow, Dolphins Into the Future, Mordant Music, High Places ... groups that had fans, certainly, but were a long way from being central. This made me wonder if the same syndrome was affecting everyone. Was everybody drifting further apart from everybody else?

The fragmentation of rock/pop has been going on as long as I can remember, but it seemed to cross a threshold this decade. There was just so much music to be into and check out. No genres faded away, they all just carried on, pumping out product, proliferating offshoot sounds. Nor did musicians, seemingly, cease and desist as they grew older; those that didn't die kept churning stuff out, jostling alongside younger artists thrusting forward to the light. It's tempting to compare noughties music to a garden choked with weeds. Except it's more like a flower bed choked with too many flowers, because so much of the output was good. The problem wasn't just quantity, it was

quantity x quality. Then there was the past too, available like never before, competing for our attention and affection. The cheapness of home studio and digital audio workstation recording, combined with the wealth of history that musicians can draw on and recombine, fuelled a mushrooming of quality music-making. But the result of all this overproduction was that "we" were spread thin across a vast terrain of sound. That's why, if you look at the end-of-year or end-of-decade polls across the gamut of music magazines, there's so little overlap. If even a relatively non-diffuse community like Pitchfork could only find its centre around records that came out in the early years of the noughties, it suggests that the culture-wide slide into entropy is speeding up.

This idea is actually addressed in one of the Pitchfork top 10 commentaries, on Arcade Fire's 2004 album *Funeral*, which is their No 2 album of the decade. Ian Cohen writes: "Whether it's due to increasingly fractious listening habits or the increased ability for dissenters to be heard, *Funeral* keeps on feeling like the last of its kind, an indie record that sounded capable of conquering the universe and then going on to do just that." Pinpointing the blogosphere's greatest liability (there's no cool or ego-burnishing value to be generated from agreeing with other people) Cohen further notes that "the consensus hyperbole that met *Funeral* resulted in any record that threatened to reach that level becoming met with severe scrutiny or even outright derision". He concludes, wistfully, that "still, we wonder if there will ever be anything quite like *Funeral* – something tells me that as music becomes even more readily available to us in the next decade, we'll still go through it all in the hopes we can find something with the unifying force and astounding emotional payload that only albums like *Funeral* can provide". What Cohen is saying here suggests that my two interpretations of Pitchfork's slant to the early noughties may actually be more closely related than I'd thought: that musical value and consensus are intimately connected.

See, I have this hunch. I reckon that if you were to draw up a top 2,000 albums of every pop decade and compare them, the noughties would win: it would beat the 1990s decisively, the 1980s handsomely, and it would thrash the 1970s and 1960s. But I also reckon that if you were to compare the top 200 albums, it'd be the other way around: the 60s would narrowly beat the 70s, the 70s would slightly less narrowly beat the 80s, the 80s would decisively beat the 90s, and the 90s would leave the noughties trailing in the dust. Yeah, it's just a hunch – but it has the ring of truth. Because I think that the higher reaches of a chart of this kind demand something more than mere musical excellence: there has to be an X factor, the hard-to-de fine quality that you could call "importance" or "greatness".

Importance is only rarely a purely intrinsic aspect of the music itself, the genius of its creator. A crucial component of "important" is impact and reception: what the audience brings to the music. Cohen's "unifying force" is not inherent, completely, to the record; it must pre-exist it to some extent, seek and find itself in the mirror of the music. At any rate, significance is a two-way street. Part of the reason the Beatles achieved greatness repeatedly is they knew the world was waiting; it made them rise to the occasion. There's a relatively recent example of this syndrome, as it happens: the release late last year, in the same week, of Guns N' Roses' *Chinese Democracy* and Kanye West's *808s & Heartbreak* (I wrote about both [here](#)). The former was a botched lunge for importance, the ghastly and grotesque spectacle of someone attempting to surpass expectations; the latter was a compelling ego-drama of wounded narcissism enacted on the grandest stage available.

The upshot of the quantity x quality overload is that those relentlessly positive types who annually chorus about what a fantastic year it's been, how "there's more good music produced each year than the previous year", are actually right. But the reliably grumpy sods who whinge about the deficiencies of the year's harvest are also right. More and more good-to-excellent music is getting produced but that very fact is thwarting the emergence of the great, smothering it. The bigger the spread, the more "we" are spread. And the less impact any given record can have. Worse, as artists internalise reduced expectations, the cycle of diminution spirals ever inward.