

Music Reviews: 2007's overlooked albums

By The Associated Press

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The AP takes a look at some of 2007's overlooked albums:

Maria Schneider Orchestra, "Sky Blue" (artistShare)

Maria Schneider's "Sky Blue" received Grammy nominations for best large jazz ensemble and instrumental composition, but might be the most overlooked of this year's multiple nominees because it's only available through the Internet (<http://www.mariasnneider.com>), without in-store distribution, under the middleman-eliminating artistShare initiative which enables her fans to directly support her recording projects.

Like Duke Ellington, Schneider writes compositions designed to showcase the improvisational talents of her musicians — many of whom have been with her since the orchestra's 1993 debut. Clarinetist Perry Robinson deftly maneuvers through the shifting irregular meters of "Aires de Lando" based on Peruvian dance music, while tenor saxophonist Rich Perry is featured on the brooding, meditative "Rich's Piece."

Schneider has moved beyond the influence of her mentors Gil Evans and Bob Brookmeyer to develop a rich orchestral palette that enhances the standard big band format by adding Gary Versace's accordion, Luciana Souza's wordless vocals, and Latin percussion. Schneider is a masterful storyteller: For example, she recalls her childhood in rural Minnesota on the pastoral "The Pretty Road," which is highlighted by Ingrid Jensen's twisting solo on trumpet and fluegelhorn with electronic effects.

The album's masterpiece is the Grammy-nominated, 22-minute composition "Cerulean Skies," a tone poem reflecting Schneider's passion for bird watching. Its lush soundscape evokes the migratory flight of birds from the Brazilian rain forest to New York's Central Park, with solos by saxophonists Donny McCaslin and Charles Pillow soaring over the orchestral backdrop, and ends with the band's members imitating bird calls and an authentic field recording of a cerulean warbler.

With "Sky Blue," her ensemble's sixth recording, the 47-year-old Schneider has firmly cemented her standing as the pre-eminent jazz orchestra composer, arranger and leader on today's scene.

• Charles J. Gans, AP Writer

Pela, "Anytown Graffiti" (Great Society)

Pela wasn't totally overlooked in 2007 — the comic strip "Sally Forth" gave the band props.

If that doesn't sound like cutting-edge stuff, Pela's not, but the debut album from the Brooklyn-based group does a fine job of making '80s arena rock sound fresh. In fact, "Anytown Graffiti" is better U2 music than some U2 music.

Singer Billy McCarthy has the voice to fill a big building, but the key to Pela's sound is the appealing peal of guitars toggling between notes and chords in Edge-like fashion. One song is built on the ticktock guitar pattern of "Sunday Bloody Sunday," only faster.

The lyrics are tough to penetrate but graced with vivid imagery as McCarthy sings about fields of glass, crumbling teeth and songs that blow up. And the a cappella opening of the title cut is sublime. Props from "Zits" could be next.

• Steven Wine, AP Writer

Pinback, "Autumn of the Seraphs" (Touch and Go)

Don't be put off by the album title and artwork, which would suggest Pinback is too heavily into prog rock. This two-man band from San Diego is really all about hooks.

On Pinback's fourth release, "Autumn of the Seraphs," the syncopated rhythms and jittery guitars are an instant grabber. Then there are the tuneful vocals of Rob Crow and Zach Smith, who trade the lead from measure to measure with clever counterpoint. Even the drums are catchy. And despite elaborate arrangements, the songs are punchy and the pace quick. This is prog rock for the ADD crowd.

Crow and Smith sing about desire, fear and the pleasure of a good parking space. Mostly the lyrics are for kids who spend too much time in their room on headphones: "Circles and squares surround us — we need to hide." A few adults might identify with that notion, too.

• Steven Wine, AP Writer

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