



On The Right Track



SANJOY Narayan

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The past five months have seen promising new releases, a good start to what I hope will be a great year for music

GOING BY what's been happening thus far this year, 2009 could be a remarkable year. No, I'm not referring to the election results and the formation of the new government – about which, perhaps justifiably, everyone, including the inexplicable stock market, has been upbeat. No, I'm, as usual, talking about music. Going by the new music that's been in heavy rotation on my playlist, this year's looking good.

I'll begin with the best new band that I've heard this year. But before I do that, a caveat. I have a soft corner for music that is moody and tinged with a bit of melancholia. That's probably why I'm a big Radiohead fan and I lap up every brooding thing that Thom Yorke and his band dish out. Or why I can keep listening to Blind Melon's late frontman Shannon Hoon whose angst-laden voice, particularly on albums like *Nico* or *Soup*, I find deeply engaging. That's also why I like Robert Smith of The Cure or Morrissey (with or without The Smiths). Fact is, I like reflective, brooding music. So when The Boxer Rebellion's new album landed up on my iPod, I exulted.

The Boxer Rebellion is a new-ish band. They've been around since 2002 and you could probably say it's a British band although two of its four members are not – one's American and another originally from Australia. Their music has dark overtones and the lyrics are wistful. And, on *Union*, their 2009 album, you can clearly make out the influence of two other seminal British bands – Radiohead, of course, but also the post-punk moody, expressionism of Joy Division. Two songs on the album are highly recommended – *Evacuate* and *Soviets*. If, unlike me, slightly sad music is not your thing, even if you're a Coldplay fan, you could give TBR a shot.

Don't waste time trying to buy a physical CD of *Union*, by the way. You won't get it. The band, which has largely self-released its work, put the album out on sale only on the net – on iTunes and on emusic – where sales shot up in the first week to go past many more established bands.

Another new album that has been a fixture on my playlist thus far this year is Animal Collective's *Merrweather Post Pavilion*. I'd heard Animal Collective, an American band from Baltimore, Maryland, earlier. Their members go by weird aliases like Panda Bear, Deakin and Geologist, and their music defies genres. They simultaneously remind

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me of experimental bands like The Flaming Lips and of more conventional rock bands. Some of their songs are catchy and infectious; others are strange and other worldly. But never, never, boring. I'd heard their 2007 album, *Strawberry Jam*, which is a difficult album – perfect rock songs are suddenly interrupted with noise; irritating vocals seeming to deliberately mess up an otherwise catchy beat and so on. It wasn't surprising that they had a narrow cult following and wide swathes of detractors. But *Merriweather* is different. On this new album, everything comes together and the sound is more melodious and very infectious.

Sometimes you need only one song to hook you on to a band. So it was for me a few weeks back when I heard *The Walls Are Coming Down* by Fanfarlo. Although Fanfarlo's first full-length album, *Reservoir*, came out this year, I haven't been able to find out much about the band besides that they are partly British and partly Swedish and based in London. But what music! Great songs, superbly crafted with instruments that include everything from guitars and drums to glockenspiels, clarinets and trumpets.

It may be just happenstance but since the beginning of the year, I've been listening to more bands from Britain than from anywhere else. Like Bat for Lashes, a Brighton-based band led by half-Pakistani, half-British singer, Natasha Khan. Her new album, *Two Suns*, is themed on exploring her blonde alter ego, named Pearl. Khan has a haunting voice and her songs are multi-layered and musically vibrant. *Daniel*, a good song to sample Bat for Lashes, is supposed to be based on actor Ralph Macchio's character in *The Karate Kid* series.

Besides these, the past five months have seen promising new releases by many bands. US singer-songwriter M Ward released an album called *Hold Time*, two years after his last one, *Post-War*. Nose-in-the-air online music mag, *Pitchfork* rates *Post-War* higher than *Hold Time* but I liked most of the songs on it. Recommended. There were good albums from the more established bands too in the past five months – Bob Dylan's new one, *Together Through Life*, grows on you, The Decemberists' *The Hazards of Love* rocks and Franz Ferdinand's *Tonight: Franz Ferdinand* is a must buy. All in all, a good start to what I hope will be a great year for music.

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