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Best music of 2008: R.E.M. to Lil Wayne

By Pop Music Writer Sean Piccoli

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R.E.M. at Langerado

Big Cypress Seminole Reservation, March 8

Knocked sideways by wind and rain, the Langerado festival took a day or so to become memorable for something besides foul weather. The Beastie Boys were experts at using merry chaos to help restore order. But R.E.M.'s headlining set the next night was an event unto itself — the first stage of the Georgia rock band's heralded, hoped-for return to form.

R.E.M. played tracks from *Accelerate* a month before the CD's release, as well as taking an expansive trip through its 1980s-2000s songbook. Singer Michael Stipe performed with bravado, and the band's pastoral blooms and sonic booms swept the Everglades like a perfect storm.

A Tribe Called Quest

Bayfront Park, Miami, Aug. 1

It was strange, but encouraging, to see twentysomethings rhyiming along to Tribe's *Electric Relaxation* (1993) as if they'd grown up with these avatars of soulful hip-hop. Closing out the daylong Rock the Bells festival, Tribe connected with the audience completely and created all the goodwill rapper Q-Tip could have wanted as a prelude to his own solo comeback.

Madonna

Dolphin Stadium, Miami

Gardens, Nov. 26

We know she contains multitudes, and true to form, Madonna put on a kind of masquerade ball as a way to show off her different selves. But the costuming wouldn't have mattered without the intensity she brought to the stage, on which she performed great pop songs including *Borderline*, *Ray of Light* and *You Must Love Me*.

Rihanna

BankAtlantic Center, Sunrise, Dec. 13

Madonna at 50 has to push herself to stay ahead of the competition. One contender, Rihanna, headlined the Y-100 Jingle Ball and made the case for herself as the next Madonna and the next Beyoncé rolled into one firecracker.

Radiohead

Cruzan Amphitheatre, West Palm Beach, May 5

The eccentric British wailers were downright affable in their first South Florida concert as an unsigned, post-major-label band. Radiohead belongs to the Internet now, and sounded as wonderfully strange and many-sided as the medium that's helped liberate them from old business arrangements.

Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings

Culture Room, Fort Lauderdale, Jan. 3

With the horn-blowing Dap Kings as her musical entourage, veteran singer Jones presented classic r&b as an earthy yet queenly pleasure.

Spoon

Revolution, Fort Lauderdale, April 16

One of the sharpest and smartest American rock bands around, Spoon played masterfully constructed, acutely observed songs about manners, fashion and addiction.

Vampire Weekend

Fillmore Miami Beach, June 9

These upstarts from Columbia University lived up to the considerable hype of their debut album with a brisk indie-pop set.

Lil Wayne, Tha Carter III

The New Orleans rapper wields melancholy wit and word-bending verbal skill, and these traits sound more than anything like a defense. Even at his funniest and most relaxed, Lil Wayne seems to be sparring with demons. Maybe it's the Crazy South, and not the Dirty South, that he's representing.

The baggage Lil Wayne carries as a sensitive kid from the projects is part of what makes him so interesting, and he doesn't hide it behind a coldhearted gangsta facade. The engaging *Dr. Carter* tutors lesser rappers without dismissing them. The monster hit *Lollipop* isn't quite the carefree little sexcapade it appears to be — not with all those curling, Auto-Tuned phrases that Wayne sings like a love-struck boyfriend.

Phone Home resembles a Tim Burton movie soundtrack at its most gothic and demented; Wayne inhabits the song like the asylum's most lucid patient. His overall sensibility lies somewhere between Kool Keith's visionary madness and Missy Elliott's laid-back, sensual cool. But there's an emotional power that is Wayne's alone. It comes through consistently, whether he's indulging in absurdist wordplay or essaying like a ghetto beat poet.

Best album » Runners-up

Santogold, Santogold

The New York singer's debut is a smart, stylish merger of dance and dub, electro-pop and postmodern soul.

Alejandro Escovedo, Real Animal

The Texas punk laureate exudes wisdom and raw power on an album of reflective, garage-rocking gems.

Metallica, Death Magnetic

As one of maybe three people who really liked *St. Anger*, I'm nevertheless thrilled to hear Metallica get back to bruising basics on the year's best metal album.

Randy Travis, Around the Bend

The veteran country singer offers a surprisingly good Nashville variation on adult-contemporary music — polished but not slick, heartfelt but not maudlin.

Best anthology

Charlie Pickett, Bar Band Americanus:

The Best of Charlie Pickett and

Granted, I'm showing a strong hometown bias for Pickett, the South Florida roots-punk rocker. But Pickett was always too good to stay underappreciated, and this collection of his recordings from the '80s is the bona-fide revival his music deserves.

Best covers album

Vetiver, Thing of the Past

Covers so lovely and obscure, you'd swear they're originals.

A 2008 mix

Yolanda's House, Ghostface Killah featuring Raekwon and Method Man; *Hideaway*, the Weepies; *Basso Profundo*, DeVotchKa; *Houston*, R.E.M.; *That's Not My Name*, the Ting Tings; *If The World*, Guns N' Roses; *Last Call*, Lee Ann Womack

Sean Piccoli can be reached at spiccoli@SunSentinel.com or 954-356-4832. He blogs at SunSentinel.com/thebeat.

2008 had to be a good year for someone. Why not music geeks?

New albums worth listening to again and again were plentiful. On local concert stages, South Floridians took in a ton of excellent live shows. Whatever our collective economic fortunes, we've had abundance in music over the past 12 months.

Here are some picks for the best, most hopeful instances of creativity standing up to calamity.

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Hit singles such as *Lollipop* made Lil Wayne's CD the year's best. » *Page 7*

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