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Tops in a turbulent year

As music goes free-agency, peeling off labels and hooking up with new distribution channels, pleasurable sounds are more plentiful than ever. Some personal favorites from 2007.

*By Dan DeLuca
Inquirer Music Critic
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Is Thom Yorke the Curt Flood of pop music?

That's the question, in a year when Kanye West gave 50 Cent a beat-down in sales, Britney Spears sleepwalked through the MTV awards, and Amy Winehouse won over America by replying to the suggestion she go to "Rehab" with three little words: "No, no, no!"

For non-sports fans, here's the analogy: Flood is the former St. Louis Cardinals centerfielder who ushered in free agency in professional sports by refusing to accept a 1969 trade to (who else?) the Philadelphia Phillies.

Yorke is the singer in Radiohead, the British art-rock band that this year offered its album *In Rainbows* on a pay-what-you-wish basis only on the Internet. That move similarly threatens to upset the apple cart of the music business.

Not that there aren't Granny Smiths lying all over the ground already. Music sales have been in decline for a decade. Even if you add in growing legal downloads, sales are off 9 percent this year, reports Nielsen SoundScan.

Radiohead, whose oft-beautiful *Rainbows* was a near-miss for the Top 10 that follows, is far from the only band to make its music available on the Web for little or no money. Others include folk-rapper Tim Fite, spoken-word rap-rocker Saul Williams, and the buzzed-about indie-pop band Black Kids (get its *Wizard of Ahhs* EP at www.blackkidsmusic.com).

But Radiohead is the first arena-size superstar act to decide that record labels are essentially unnecessary. In practice, the gambit by the quintet from Oxford, England, is not much of a risk. They've made their millions, and succeeded in part because of the promotional assistance of EMI, the label they've left behind. And *In Rainbows* will, in fact, come out on CD on ATO Records next month, when it will no longer be available gratis via your computer.

Nevertheless, the implications are seismic for what's left of the music business. Shortly after *In Rainbows* came out, those laid-back '70s rockers the Eagles made their CD *Long*

Road Out of Eden available exclusively at Wal-Mart, and it topped the charts. And Madonna announced she'll be leaving Warner Brothers to put her future in the hands of entertainment behemoth Clear Channel.

The era of free agency in music is upon us. Big names will flock to the highest bidder, and up-and-comers will have to strike the best deals they can, whether it's with record labels, liquor companies or coffee chains. The Internet is there as a ready-made distribution network, and touring is an increasingly important money-making aspect of the business.

Maybe that's why it seems as though I saw more knock-out shows than ever this year: M.I.A. at the Electric Factory; Jason Isbell at the North Star; the White Stripes at Wilmington's Grand Opera House; Seun Kuti and Egypt 80 at World Cafe Live; Bruce Springsteen at the Wachovia Center; the Arcade Fire at the Tower; and Jay-Z at the Fillmore at the TLA.

Maybe it's that the flow - or Flood - of music gets deeper and wider all the time. Yet it's hard to make a cultural impact when there's so much competition available at so little cost. And all's not well in every genre: The pickings were slim in full-length albums in hip-hop and mainstream country, for instance.

But the sheer amount of pleasurable music out there is staggering. It was an excellent year, for instance, for twitchy electro-dance music. If you like LCD Soundsystem, seek out Justice or Fujiya & Miyagi. And if you dig the retro-soul of Amy Winehouse, seek out Sharon Jones & the Dap-Kings or Nicole Willis and the Soul Investigators.

The lists that follow are personal best-ofs that take the measure of a very busy year spent listening to music.

Lily Allen, *Alright, Still*. I'm happy that Lily Allen comes first alphabetically. The smart-as-a-whip Brit lass - who reminds me of my all-time favorite smart-as-a-whip Brit lass, the late, great Kirsty MacColl - makes a perfect bookend with the more tortured Amy Winehouse as U.K. invaders who have collaborated with retro beat-maker Mark Ronson. And just because Allen is more upbeat doesn't mean she's any less substantive. Cheery buzz-off cuts such as "Smile" and "Not Big," which made Allen a MySpace star long before her album was released Stateside in January, deploy ska hooks with skill and savvy, as the girl-on-the-street narratives reveal trouble beneath the catchy surfaces. Download: "LDN."

Common, *Finding Forever*. The Chicago rapper born Lonnie Lynn is one of those thoughtful hip-hop guys who has trouble getting real street cred because he's just not, you know, nasty enough. Since 2005's CD *Be*, when he hooked up with fellow Chi-town native Kanye West, Common has stepped up his game. Unlike *Be*, *Forever* is expansive, dense with verbal dexterity. Meaty topics are explored, from racial identity to the "God questioning" of "Misunderstood," but storytelling skills and a solid lineup of guests keep it on the right side of the entertaining/educational divide. Download: "The Game."

Miranda Lambert, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. **Miranda Lambert gets your attention because she's such an incredible badass. The rocked-out country sharpshooter steps**

up as the protagonist of the title cut, loads her shotgun, and takes aim at an abusive boyfriend. But she holds you rapt with the quality and beyond-her-24-years wisdom of her songs. Download: "Famous in a Small Town."

LCD Soundsystem, *Sound of Silver*. Masters of spastic electro-funk rarely write great songs. And geeky indie hipsters aren't usually so good at making dance music that shakes its booty with reckless abandon. LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy is the exception on both counts, and *Sound of Silver* manages to be melancholy *and* exuberant. Download: "All My Friends."

Jens Lekman, *Night Falls Over Kortedala*. Jens Lekman hails from Angered (Sweden), but on his third full-length album, the droll songsmith seems imperturbable. Lekman is often compared to Stephin Merritt of the Magnetic Fields, but his hummable songs aren't quite so fussy. And a warm heart beats through slightly twisted tales such as "A Postcard to Nina," in which he pretends to be a lesbian pal's paramour, only to be cross-examined by her father. Download: "The Opposite of Hallelujah."

Nick Lowe, *At My Age*. Though he's been making mellow records for 13 years now, it's hard to resist wishing that Nick Lowe, once known as the Jesus of Cool, would rip it up again like in his Rockpile days. Once it's clear that that's not going to happen on *At My Age* - which happens to be 58 - the disc's pleasures come to the fore. Lowe remains a peerless craftsman, and he navigates the soul-country battlefield. Download: "Hope for Us All."

Various Artists, *I'm Not There: Original Soundtrack*. Bob Dylan loomed large as a cultural figure in 2007, and there wasn't an album with better songs than this one. I've always preferred Dylan doing Dylan to anyone else - including director Todd Haynes - but this double-disc movie soundtrack makes the old Bard seem new. It's a who's who of indie rock, with Cat Power, Yo La Tengo, and the Hold Steady, while presenting oldsters such as Richie Havens and Roger McGuinn in a most favorable light. Download: Mark Lanegan's "Man in the Long Black Coat."

Kanye West, *Graduation*. "I'm like the fly Malcolm X, buy any jeans necessary," Kanye West quips on his third album. It's a typical blend of braggadocio and self-criticism. No subject is more fascinating to West than himself, and lucky for us, he's nearly as talented as he thinks he is. Download: "Stronger."

White Stripes, *Icky Thump*. Nothing wakes you up in the morning quite like Jack White turning his amp up to 11 on the title track, which kicks off this raging return to rock by the guitarist and his ex-wife and drummer, Meg. "Rag and Bone" provides the metaphor for the album, and the Stripes' career, as they scavenge away, turning trash into treasure. Download: "You Don't Know What Love Is (You Just Do as You're Told)."

Amy Winehouse, *Back to Black*. "There's nothing you can teach me that I can't learn from Mr. Hathaway," Amy Winehouse sings in her sultry smokehouse voice on "Rehab," the all-too-perfect encapsulation of her real-life drama. But never mind the tabloids. From the beehive hairdo to the public misbehaving, Winehouse is a rock star like Keith Richards is a rock star. She has sucked up lessons from Donny Hathaway and Ray

Charles, and she made the album of the year by turning classic girl-group soul into a vehicle for her personal troubles. Download: "Love Is a Losing Game."

Honorable Mentions: **Band of Horses**, *Cease to Begin*; **Feist**, *The Reminder*; **Jason Isbell**, *Sirens of the Ditch*; **Jay-Z**, *American Gangster*; **Kings of Leon**, *Because of the Times*; **Okkervil River**, *The Stage Names*; **Robert Plant and Alison Krauss**, *Raising Sand*; **Radiohead**, *In Rainbows*; **Josh Ritter**, *The Historical Conquests of Josh Ritter*; **Bruce Springsteen**, *Magic*