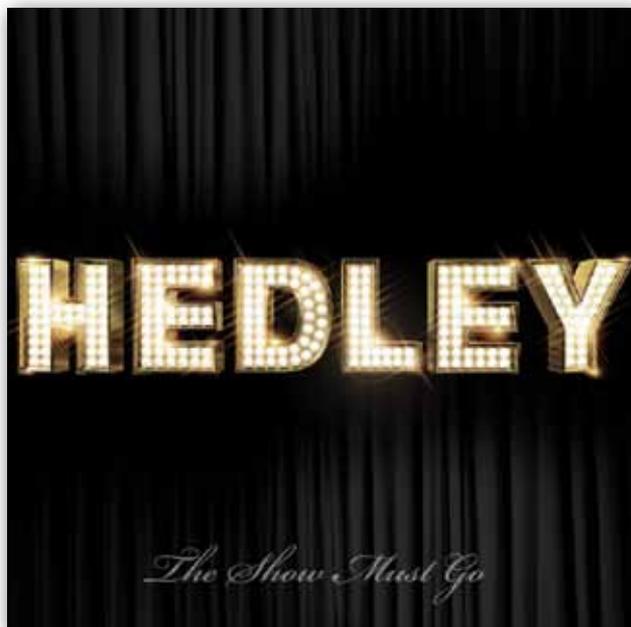




VAMPIRE WEEK-END

★ CONTRA (XL RECORDINGS)

■ Contra is the follow-up album to the indie rock band's critically acclaimed self titled debut in 2008. The new release was produced by band member Rostam Batmanglij. A tad less vigorous, yet as classy and topped with a blissful array of trendy vocal harmonies and world-music influenced sounds, this album may transport you into a timeless era. The new wave touches on the track 'Holiday' and the Simon and Garfunkel'esque arrangements on 'White Sky' are perfectly eccentric. No wonder the young band is being cherished by the media and their fans alike.



HEDLEY

★ THE SHOW MUST GO (UNIVERSAL)

■ It has been two years since the BC boys served their fans with some hard driven rock and roll. So their third studio album The Show Must Go was highly anticipated. And this time around, not only are they back with their catchy titles and choruses, they've managed to step it up a notch while exploring additional modern pop boundaries. Hedley has a way with words: whether writing a sarcastic tribute to reality TV ('Cha-Ching') or a profoundly heartfelt ballad ('Perfect'), their authentic 'in your face' style is what we like about them.



YOU SAY PARTY! WE SAY DIE!

★ XXXX (PAPER BAG/UNIVERSAL)

■ The West Coast quintet had made its mark with some groovy dance-punk beats on their previous album titled Lose All The Time (2007). While their new record XXXX is loaded with rocky fun and love themed antics, the loudness and stomp is not consistent. YSP! WSD! has creatively explored their slower tempo and cast some melody infused choruses. This is a highly manicured production with dedicated musicians. These new songs will probably find their voice in the band's unique ways on stage. Definitely try to catch a concert.



DRAGONETTE

★ FIXIN' TO THRILL (UNIVERSAL)

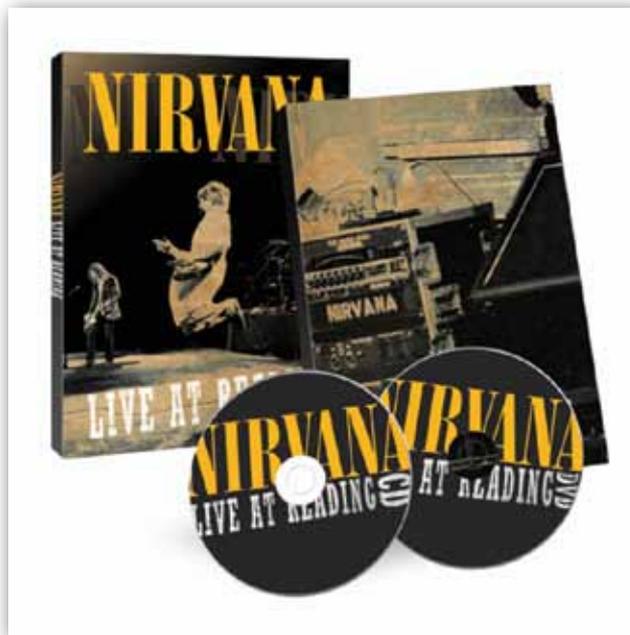
■ Fixin' to Thrill is the Toronto electro-pop group's second record. This release continues to showcase the 80's influenced sounds heard on their debut album Galore and the busy synth beats take centre stage again (but are at times a little repetitive). The tunes are sexually charged. The fun begins with the first title track and fades away here and there with a few slower tracks ('Easy'). Lead vocalist Martina Sorbara's charmingly clear yet scratchy vocals (à la Cyndi Lauper) deliver yet again. Take away: the nice blend of experimental electro arrangements might catch your ear.



ALICIA KEYS

★ THE ELEMENT OF FREEDOM (J RECORDS/SONY)

■ The multi-instrumentalist strikes loudly with a well balanced fourth album. Keys plays up some power ballads ('Empire State of Mind') AND some dimmer, sexier, low-key vocals on her jazz infused and smooth R & B tracks ('Love is Blind'). On The Element of Freedom, the NYC raised singer-songwriter and philanthropist doesn't stray far away from her favourite subject: love - yet the evolving songwriting subtleties are noticeable. Her signature piano skills are still the melodic punch, yet she dared to take her style one step further. This woman is surely gifted.



NIRVANA

★ LIVE AT READING CD-DVD (Geffen)

■ This is a re-mastered release of the grunge band's legendary concert that took place in the UK in 1992. For those who knew the melodic song-writing strength of frontman Kurt Cobain, you'll be happy to relive such an emotionally charged concert: from revolutionary tracks like About a Girl to Smells Like Teen Spirit, the raw, misbehaved vocals and eccentric guitar riffs are still musically relevant today. If Nirvana was not on your radar and you decide to dive in, you may well be exploring a precursor genre into today's indie and pop music scenes.



FINAL FANTASY

★ HEARTLAND (FOR GREAT JUSTICE RECORDS)

■ Heartland is Owen Pallett's (aka Final Fantasy) third studio project. Crowned Canada's inaugural Polaris Music Prize winner in 2006 with his controversial debut release titled He Poos Clouds, much has happened since. Pallett's fascinating collaborator on Heartland is the Czech Symphony Orchestra. The Torontonian has proven to be a violinist extraordinaire and has worked on strings arrangements for fellow Canadian indie musicians The Hidden Cameras, Jim Guthrie and Arcade Fire. Pallett has deepened his technical and tricky arrangements and this 'conceptual' album is an adventure in itself.



RIHANNA

★ RATED R (DEF JAM)

■ Rated R is a complex and poignant look into the star's emotionally turbulent past year. Accompanied by more aggressively sounding guitar riffs, Rihanna sings her abuse like a freeing mantra. Surrounded by her mentor (Jay-Z) and powerhouse producers, they've managed to elevate her pop sound to a resonating pop sound. Fearless and determined, she has made this dark part of her life part of her career. Let's hope we can later remember the full artistry of this project and not simply the autobiography references.