The Ten Most Underrated Rap Albums of 2006

Twenty years after the fact, Andrew Friedman goes deep on ten LPs he insists deserve a second look.

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OCT 08, 2026 PAID



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At this point, we know the supposed story: Napster and the internet in general leveled the playing field for hip-hop. Blogs and message boards helped artists and scenes transcend location and aesthetic; Young Jeezy and Aesop Rock were able to reach national audiences. That was the first half of the '00s. By 2006, the dust had settled and everyone was kind of looking around wondering, "now what?"

Hell Hath No Fury, *Fishscale*, *King,* and Peak Lil Wayne were the obvious winners, with *Doctor's Advocate* and *Food & Liquor* filling out that year's A-tier. But beyond that are a slew of pretty-good albums by artists who had set almost impossibly high standards for themselves. *TM102* had to follow *TM101*. *The Blue Carpet Treatment* established Snoop as the definitive "old rapper who still cares about rapping" but is mostly memorable for the Stevie Wonder feature and the song he made for his son's Pop Warner team. *Release Therapy* was just ass. Gucci Mane still felt more like a cryptid from East Atlanta than an actual, terrestrial rapper. 2006 also saw some real duds: the Jurassic 5 album without Cut Chemist, a cynical Dr. Octagon re-boot, the Bubba Sparxxx album with "Ms. New Booty" that made him question his rap career.

Nothing illustrates this more clearly than *Kingdom Come*. Like a time traveler who failed to consider the movement of the planet, Jay-Z returned from his "retirement" to find himself in a completely different ecosystem than the one he left in 2003, a planet overrun by teenagers in tall tees doing elaborate dance moves that made his back hurt. He had no grill to show, no dreads to shake. Another Mr. Carter had taken his throne. And was that Pharrell… rapping?

Here are ten albums from a confusing year that deserve a second look.

Project Pat, *Crook by da Book: The Fed Story*



When Project Pat went to jail in 2001 for a gun charge, Three 6 Mafia were extremely popular but not really taken seriously by the coastal rap intelligentsia. When he came home in '05, the critical consensus had shifted, "Stay Fly" was one of the biggest songs in the world, and the crew had won an Oscar for their contributions to *Hustle & Flow*. So maybe *Crook* was a little slept on given everything going on around him at the time. But "Good Googly Moogly" went platinum on the blogs, "Tell Tell Tell" and "Raised In The Projects" were club staples, and the album is front to back hooks. "Cocaine" and "2 Dollar N----s" are all-timers. The only reason this isn't a classic is it's not as good as his other two classic albums. *Crook by da Book* rules. The haters scream "oh no!"

Z-Ro, *I'm Still Livin'*



Z-Ro was already two albums deep into establishing himself nationally with 2004's *The Life and Times of Joseph McVey* and the following year's *Let The Truth Be Told*, but *Still Livin* finds the Mo City Don deeper in his feelings than ever. "One Deep" and "Let The Truth Be Told" are legitimately beautiful; it's kind of funny to hear Lil Keke on the latter, completely unable to do the bummer shit as well as his young Screwed Up Click ally. Still, Ro really shines when he gets nudged out of his moodiness. The PM Dawn-flipping "Continue To Roll" is plaintive, and he sounds extra motivated on "Man Cry," a remake of Scarface's equally sad "I Seen A Man Die." He still has an unexpected knack for jams for the ladies and "Homie, Lover, Friend" is no exception. Lots of Mike Dean production here too, although we are just going to pretend "Battlefield" didn't happen. (Bonus: this infographic about the Z-Ro discography)

Trae, *Restless*



Restless opens with “Real Talk,” one of the best and most inexplicable rap songs of the decade. Wall-to-wall double-time raps without a hook—over what I think is a prog rap sample, which runs for 40 full seconds before Trae comes in. The way he runs the “… on the block” rhyme back sounds like grime. But then the album goes the complete other direction for the next track, some unadulterated snap music with Young Joc called “In The Hood.” It’s fine! Just a drastic shift. Anyway, Trae sounds like he’s rapping from the afterlife and it’s awesome, although it’s kind of unnerving on “Swang,” the Fat Pat-mourning track featuring Pat’s recently deceased brother Big H.A.W.K.

Juvenile, *Reality Check*



OK, “Get Ya Hustle On” will always overshadow the rest of this album because the image of people buying bricks with FEMA money in the ruins of post-Katrina New Orleans is permanently burned into the brains of anyone who was around to see the video when it dropped. But Juvie has always been one of the more underrated rappers on the charts and I enjoy how his flow evened out over time as he moved further from Cash Money. The street shit is solid (“Break A Brick Down” and “Around The Way”) and the club shit is enjoyable (“Way I Be Leanin” and “Loose Booty”). “Sets Go Up” is one of my favorite UTP songs (RIP Wacko). Check the “Posse On Broadway” flow on “Animal” too.

Young Dro, *Best Thang Smokin*



Few artists were as maligned as T.I. compatriot Young Dro in their time, and few albums have aged better than *Best Thang Smokin*. Dismissed in certain corners as someone who only rapped about how his cars were all kinds of colors, Dro later became appreciated for the boundaries he pushed in rapping about how his cars were all kinds of colors. “Shoulder Lean” can hardly be disposable club music when the “Chevy blew (blue) like whirlwind.” “My Chevy lookin tropical/A wimoweh, a wimoweh” is hip-hop history. It’s not really fair to Dro to say *Smokin* is only about cars—it’s also about Polo—but it wouldn’t be unfair either, given how much mileage he gets. Prime yelling-out-your-sunroof music.

Ghostface Killah, *More Fish*



Ghostface is a singular talent and *Fishscale* hit extremely hard, so it wasn't difficult to sell a collection of loosies from the same sessions without elaboration. But this album has a ton of Trife Da God (Ghost's reliable sidekick), Ghost rapping over "Know The Ledge" ("Ghost Is Back"), a scorching guest spot from Redman, and (on some extremely mid-2000's shit) an entire song about poker from lesser Theodore Unit member Shawn Wigs. As tax write-off contract obligation compilations go, *More Fish* is only second to *The Lost Tapes*.

Nas, *Hip-Hop Is Dead*



The thing about “Who Killed It?,” the song where Nas famously raps in a Sam Spade accent for three whole minutes, is that legacy artists should take risks. Sometimes you get one of the strangest songs in the history of the genre; sometimes you get the legitimately interesting “Where Are They Now?,” which namechecks a few dozen once-great rappers who fell by the wayside (and would eventually be followed by two coast-specific remixes featuring some of those very rappers). Sometimes Chris Webber—yes, the Fab 5 member and 1994 NBA Rookie of the Year—ends up on the boards (“Blunt Ashes”). The more straightforward tracks are pretty good too, especially “Can’t Forget About You” and “Hustlers,” where Game raps about stealing *Illmatic* and *The Chronic* at the same time.

Ray Cash, *Cash On Delivery*



One of rap's true one-hit-wonders, "Bumpin My Music" is still in rotation in NBA arenas and car stereos. But don't blame Ray, who did his part on his very good debut album. The flow is solid, the hooks are good (especially "Smokin and Leanin" and "Dope Game"), and the production is quality. Ray also raps about how hustling is annoying and standing on the corner is boring, which I appreciate. Still do not understand how Cleveland ended up a Southern rap city, but that is a Wikipedia hole for another day.

Rick Ross, *Port of Miami*



Given the expansive career he would go on to have and world-weary boss persona he would construct, *Port of Miami* is one of the stranger false starts in the history of music. Y Kant Tori Read type shit. At the time, “Hustlin” was ubiquitous and annoying, and made you kind of mad for liking it. Who the fuck was this large man? The album that followed was like a sardonic joke about rap from Miami: completely untenable boasts about cocaine trafficking, *Scarface* soundtrack flips, the shiniest synths you have ever heard, double entendres about the color white. Whenever I hear “Street Life” I picture Rick Ross and Lloyd pretending to drive in front of a green screen, like in a sitcom from 1995. But, like, in a good way though.

Field Mob, *Light Poles and Pine Trees*



The thing about Field Mob is they sound(ed) like Field Mob. Albany, GA is closer to Tallahassee than Atlanta, and still a few hours from both cities, and their particular brand of country rap tune is one of one. *Light Poles and Pine Trees* is the follow-up to 2002's stellar *From Tha Roota To Tha Toota*, and picks up where that album's Jazze Pha-produced breakout single "Sick Of Being Lonely" left off. Skating rink jams and wah-wah guitars abound on "So What," "Sorry Baby," and "At The Park." You even get peak Polow da Don on the Nintendoish "Baby Bend Over." It's bittersweet hearing the Wesley Snipes/*Blade* shoutout on the anti-colorism anthem "Blacker The Berry," knowing what will happen with that franchise. Anyway, it's a shame Smoke and Shawn Jay aren't working together anymore because Field Mob was a lot of fun.

Honorable mentions

MF Grimm, *American Hunger*
The Streets, *The Hardest Way To Make An Easy Living*
DJ Khaled, *Listennn... The Album*
Pitbull, *El Mariel* (specifically for Tom Breihan's headline about it)
Kevin Federline, *Playing With Fire* (strictly for the contributions of Bosko and Ya Boy)

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