

TAKE IT HOME ON CD

Lily Allen (Capitol)

ALRIGHT, STILL

Lily Allen turns a smile upside down on *Alright, Still*.

The 21-year-old British pop singer absolutely nails the opening track/first single "Smile" from her release.

The song glides out with deceptively sweet melody and gentle, reggae-kissed cadence as the dulcet-voiced Allen coos about an unfaithful lover who falls on hard times: "At first, when I see you cry, it makes me smile/Yeah, it makes me smile."

The hook is irresistible.

But Allen's sassy disposition becomes tiresome as she never pulls herself out of her smart-aleck shtick.

The resourceful victim of "Smile" increasingly proves herself to be a callous antagonist, chortling with self-satisfied glee about her clever smack-downs of would-be suitors on "Knock 'Em Out" and coming up with cruel insults for the elderly on "Nan You're a Window Shopper."

You don't have to be a psychic to guess from the title that "Everything's Just Wonderful" is sardonic or that "Friend of Mine" will hinge on the lyric, "You're no friend of mine." Allen may be 21, but she seems more like an insolent 14-year-old than an adult.

Yet the attitude is OK — subversively refreshing, even — in measured doses.

The Cringe (Listen/Sony)

TIPPING POINT

In the less-than-two-and-a-half-minute second track on The Cringe's new *Tipping Point*, the New York City band accomplishes something it couldn't in its six-minute opener: a connection with listeners.

The sprawling first cut, "Blame," rambles and weaves and buzzes with self-importance keyed to lines that don't mean much without more context, like the opening salvo, "Staring down the barrel of the words you always say/If you push your drugs at me, I'll throw them all away."

But then second track "Undone" rolls out, and the Cringe is suddenly thrashing through straight-ahead invigoration.

Not to pick on a band that rocks better than most of its contemporaries, but the members of The Cringe apparently listened to too much U2 and Pearl Jam, digesting the dynamics of how those bands sounded but not really getting it.

Singer John Cusimano (husband to food-show queen Rachael Ray) undercuts his group's cause with the lyrics, a combination of lazy metaphors and vagueness that proves counterproductive to the important-sounding arrangements and his earnest delivery.

His themes of apprehension, doom and anger hover over the tracks with hollow menace, a frustrating foil to what are, for the most part, a fired-up bunch of songs.

Astrid Williamson (One Little Indian)

DAY OF THE LONE WOLF

Astrid Williamson sings of ordinary people and extraordinary life on the jangly track "Superman 2" from her new *Day of the Lone Wolf*. And she sounds all too ordinary, her uneven, indistinct voice only making an impact during the fully instrumented, backing-vocal-supported chorus.

Fortunately, that mundane bit of pop is an anomaly on *Day of the Lone Wolf*, and elsewhere the Shetland Islands-born Williamson proves herself the kind of elusive female singer-songwriter that drives fans of elusive female singer-songwriters crazy.

On her third solo release, the former front woman for the band Goya Dress is mysterious, sensual and melancholy, the foundation for many a cult artist.

Williamson is clearly in her comfort zone channeling Sarah McLachlan, which she does on the grandiose ballad "Reach," the lush "Tonight," the meandering "Forgive Me" and the minimalist "True Romance."



"Dreamgirls" stars, from left, Keith Robinson, Sharon Leal, Jamie Foxx, Jennifer Hudson, Anika Noni Rose and Beyonce Knowles. Hudson and another "Dreamgirls"

co-star, Eddie Murphy, are both up for supporting-actor Academy Awards for their roles in the movie.

And the Oscar *should* go to ...

Academy Award predictor ranks who will take home a statue

By RUTHIE STEIN
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Oscar is having a loopy year. "Dreamgirls" leads the pack with eight nominations, but none for best director or best picture.

Of the five movies competing in the latter category, only "The Queen" secured a royal nod for best acting.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences continued its trend of the past several years by recognizing smaller independent films over major Hollywood fare, one possible explanation why "Dreamgirls" fell short of votes for a best picture nomination.

Of those that made the cut, only "The Departed" has brought in more than \$100 million at the box office.

"Hollywood studios need to amortize their investment always. They are forced to kind of reach a middle ground and put out movies that have more of a popular appeal," academy President Sid Ganis says, explaining why the fare at multiplexes around the country is less likely to become Oscar bait.

Ryan Gosling, Forest Whitaker, Peter O'Toole, Kate Winslet, Judi Dench and Jackie Earle Haley all received nominations for performances that were not widely seen.

The biggest names on the Oscar telecast Sunday will be the presenters, not the nominees.

The only undisputed movie stars up for a gold statuette are Leonardo DiCaprio, Will Smith and Clint Eastwood, for directing "Letters From Iwo Jima."

Stretching the parameters slightly, you could add Winslet, Cate Blanchett and Meryl Streep — although they're more "actresses" than targets for the paparazzi — Mark Wahlberg, perennially on the verge of superstardom, and Eddie Murphy, who has emeritus movie star status.

It's a tough race to call.

The winners for best acting appear to be a lock, which makes me suspicious of an upset in at least one category. The best picture competition, however, is wide open.

Best picture

It looks like "Babel" and "The Departed" headed into the final stretch. The argument against the latter is that it's beneath the academy to bequeath the top prize to a remake (of the Hong Kong thriller "Infernal Affairs").

On the other hand, "Babel" has deeply divided academy members, much as it has regular audiences.

That could set the stage for an upset in which "Little Miss Sunshine" wins and everybody at the Kodak Theatre bursts into wild applause because, in their heart of hearts, it's the picture they love best.

Will win: "The Departed"
Should win: "Little Miss Sunshine"

Best actor

DiCaprio stood a chance had he been nominated for "The Departed" instead of "Blood Diamond." As it is, he's out, along with Smith and Gosling.

On the strength of his transcendent performance and Screen Actors Guild award, Whitaker should get a chance to deliver another charmingly bumbling speech.

But some in the academy believe

that his is more of a supporting role. Add to that the enormous sentiment for O'Toole, because this will probably be his last shot at a real Oscar (opposed to the honorary one he already owns) and there could be a surprise when the envelope is opened.

Will win: Forest Whitaker
Should win: Whitaker

Best actress

Like Queen Elizabeth II, Helen Mirren's chances of being dethroned are nil. However, it's worth noting that she has formidable competition in Dench, Streep, Penelope Cruz and particularly Winslet.

Will win: Helen Mirren
Should win: Mirren

Supporting actor

Should there be an upset, it will most likely occur here. Murphy remains the front-runner, but he's not exactly Mr. Popularity in Hollywood.

Like O'Toole, Alan Arkin has been around for a long time and may benefit from a similar feeling that this is his last chance for an Oscar.

Dead or alive, he put the shine on "Little Miss Sunshine." Still, my vote goes to Wahlberg, for his outstanding performance in "The Departed."

Will win: Eddie Murphy
Should win: Mark Wahlberg

Supporting actress

The fairy-tale-like ascent of Jennifer Hudson from "American Idol" loser to "Dreamgirls" showstopper makes her a shoo-in.

Again affirming what a dazzling year it has been for actresses, Adriana Barraza, Rinko Kikuchi, Blanchett and little miss Abigail Breslin are all winners in their own right.

Will win: Jennifer Hudson
Should win: Hudson

Director

After five directing nods, Martin Scorsese has perfected the half-smile

for the camera as a competitor dashes up to the podium. Well, Marty, the time has come to break out your full grin.

Nobody is taking the big prize away from you, not even Eastwood. "The Departed" isn't Scorsese's best effort, but it's hugely entertaining, and his artist's eye is evident in every frame.

Will (finally) win: Martin Scorsese
Should win: Scorsese

Foreign language film

Having seen "The Lives of Others," "Pan's Labyrinth," "Water," "Days of Glory" and "After the Wedding," I can attest that this is one awesome list.

The best picture nominees pale in comparison. While it's hard to pick among them, Germany's "Lives of Others" and Mexico's "Pan's Labyrinth" are favored.

The academy will honor itself by choosing either of these wondrous and challenging works of art.

"Labyrinth" has the edge because the box-office is surprisingly strong for a subtitled film and because it is up for six Oscars, a sure sign that academy members really like it. But how could they not love "Lives" as well?

Will win: "Pan's Labyrinth"
Should win: "The Lives of Others"

Animated feature film

It's a close race between the souped-up "Cars" and the tapping "Happy Feet." Here's one category where the kids should get a vote.

Will win: "Cars"
Should win: "Cars"

Documentary feature

Another unusually strong category. But unless the Bush gang has figured out some way to rig the vote, Al Gore should emerge victorious for telling the truth about global warming.

Will win: "An Inconvenient Truth"
Should win: "An Inconvenient Truth"

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