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RICHMOND FONTAINE RODNEY CROWELL GRETCHEN WILSON KATHLEEN EDWARDS SARAH LEE GUTHRIE AND JOHNNY IRION **ALLISON MOORER BIG BLUE HEARTS** HAYSEED DIXIE **CHUCK PROPHET** 



# RICHIMOND f'onthaine

#### How much of a factor was country music in your

listening habits when you were growing up?

Well my friends all listened to Hank Williams Jnr and Merle Haggard, while my family listened to Willie Nelson. But, as a kid, the only one I liked was Willie. Some of my friends were rough, kinda racist, rednecks - pretty mean guys. So I never really liked country music till is was 13 or 14 when my brother moved to Los Angeles and started to send me home tapes of Lone Justice, Rank and File, The Blasters, X and Dwight Yoakam. Then it began to make sense to me that It wasn't just their music, it was anybodies. I really feel in love with it as I'd always liked the feel of it. So when I was 16 I really wanted to be in a band like Rank and File. But I didn't know who Gram Parsons was till I was 26. It was Rank and File. The Long Ryders, Green on Red that whole LA scene and I also bought some Jason and The Scorchers then later I feel in love with Husker Du and The Replacements, most kids seemed to around that age. Then I really got into the story songwriters like Paul Kelly

his album So Much Water, So Close To Home, that how I found out about Raymond Carver and that's when I started to read in earnest, I was 21 I think. I'm 36 now. Another songwriter I really liked was Shane McGowan, I was always a huge fan of the Pogues. It was the way Shane had the guts to be anyone and say anything in his songs.

In your own writing you draw a lot from a darker side, is that where you find the more interesting characters?

Well, yes but I have never lived half as hard as those guys or I wouldn't be here now. The more I think about it because before I never gave it much thought until people started to ask me in the last while, but I did grow up in Reno, Nevada, which is a gambling town and it has a really bad underbelly. It's a 24 hour drinking and gambling town, so a lot of people really fall on hard times there. And when

I was younger I was always attracted to that kind of a life, just because it seemed to be free and everybody had given up on you. I didn't have much confidence so that seemed a safer way - to give up. So always used to go to old man bars. I never went to bars where there was kinds my own age as I was always uncomfortable in their company. The only people I met one on one where waitresses. There was always someone, the biggest drunk whoever, who would go with me. Everybody has there own reasons to go to those places, me, I just felt better being with a bunch of losers, well not necessarily losers but their company just felt better to me. I went to college and it just killed me being around all those people who were really doing well. It felt better to be there plus my stories always tended to be dark, from when I first started writing short stories through to my songs. I'd been trying to write some country-pop type of songs for a number of years but that was frustrating so I began to write the short stories and everything changed to a darker tone then, but less so now I think.

# Was English something that you had an interest in from your school days?

I've heard a lot of people say this but I've always felt that writers had to go to Harvard or Cambridge or wherever, that they couldn't be normal guys like me. I'd read Charles Buwkoski, and I wasn't nowhere near as cool as him, I mean I tried living in motels and such but I

just got really scared. Then when I read Carver he seemed to be the same sort of guy, same sort of upbringing, so that's when it made sense to me. I didn't dislike school, I enjoyed the studying aspect and I'd always liked libraries but English, no, I didn't understand it.

#### So when did you start to perform the songs that you were writing?

Well I'd been in bands since I was like 15. There was a great band out of Reno called The Boston Wranglers, they were like the Long Ryders, a brilliant band. Then the lead singer Michael Clark got cancer, a sudden 6 week thing and died. They had been nice enough to let me and my band open up for them. In Reno we'd played the little rough bars and we'd get heckled a lot. There was a punk scene but I was too folky for them but I was too dark for everybody else. So I moved up to Portland, Oregon and I met these guys maybe a year afterwards. That's when we started Richmond Fontaine and we started putting records out.

You've had a good response in Europe has it been similar back home?
Well the Uncut feature changed everything in that a lot of other people started taking notice. Sean our drummer was the only one who had been outside the US before other than trips to Mexico. We all feel really lucky to be here and I always wanted to come to Ireland but I never thought I'd get to. Our first trip here was to the Kilkenny Rhythm and Roots festival and it was one of the best weekends I've ever had, for many reasons. the shows went ok for me personally I didn't screw up too bad. Everyone you met loved the same kind of music, going into a bar it felt like everyone was on the same side as you. Then I got to ride back with Dave Alvin whose one of my bigger heroes and he was cool to me. I'd actually interviewed him once for a paper in Portland, but he was real nice to me.

#### What do you plan to do next in terms of recording?

The man who did Post To Wire with us J.D. Foster, who's such a great guy, he came to Portland about 5 months ago for some other reason and I talked him into staying a extra week. So he and I and the guys did a folk record. It was a pretty stark, story orientated, we didn't use the pedal steel. So were thinking of putting that out ... it's called The Fitzgerald. But also I have another batch of songs that we might go back in and record that are more rock. The plan is to go to Wavelab in Tuscon with J.D. We're thinking of doing that in either February or April. If that session turns out good then we'll do that one first. It's kinda of up in the air though. The Fitzgerald will be a good record for certain people, it's a bleak affair. After Post to Wire I felt I could take the opportunity to write some story songs, so I did. It's one of the things I'm most proud of, but we'll have to wait and see if it turns out to be the next record. After we've made demos for the new record we'll be better placed to make a decision on that.

Well I met Craig Shumacher, he's a friend of Larry Crane who runs Tape Op and the studio where we record. So we all talked and we'd wanted to go down there so this is an excuse. I'd heard albums by Neco Case and Steve Wynn that were recorded there that I though sounded great, as do those Calexico records. And also J.D. and Craig are good buddies. I trust J.D. as he's a pretty good guy.

# The touring line up doesn't include the pedal steel what's the reason for

Well our pedal steel guy just doesn't like touring that much. So we are a five piece at home. He's a brilliant steel player but he's also a session guy so he comes and goes. He gets tired of sleeping on floors so he's the only smart guy among us (laughs). He's also a computer wizz.

#### Is this it for you then?

I don't know I like writing songs and stories. I just can't seem to quit and I've always just wanted to be a part of a band and play the kind of music that we're playing. I've never really thought passed it. That all I ever wanted to do.

#### How is the current scene for a band like yourselves in this current climate?

We do pretty good, it's hard, I mean we've never done well enough to all quit working. I think of us like a beat-up kind of car. When a wheel falls off - one of the guys has to quit - we fix it and continue. I'm just glad were playing. I just try to keep my mind on writing songs and I'm having a good time with that. As a kid all I ever wanted to be was in a band that was like Rank and File. I used to take my Mom's car and go to San Francisco to see them and there would be 30 to 50 people. I knew that was the kind of numbers those bands got. But I've been playing the same kind of music my whole life so it's just who I am. I don't jump styles a lot. I will explore different avenues like any writer might and also where I'm at mentally, like if I'm really down or something, that will be reflected. I'm just in it for the ride. I'd be painting a house if I wasn't here talking to you and I'd much rather be here talking to you than painting a house. I have a little painting company business back home. With Larry Crane he'd bought a house so we exchanges our services for studio time, Sean in the band is an electrician so we wired and we painted.

## There seems to be an assumption from some of the songs that you guys are hard drinkin' miserable downers but that obviously not true...

I get a lot of shit from the band and people. There's this story, that's true, that my brother was a song writer in high school and he was a total womaniser and before he went out he would always tune his guitar and practice a song then later he'd bring a girl home and as my Mom was asleep by eight he'd bring a girl home with some beers and play her some love song back in the backroom. So I said if I ever get the chance to write a good song I'm never going to write about girls I'm going to write about something important. it was as a reaction to that, but I do write about girls and there is comedy in the songs too but the darker side is part of me is there also. I mean I've always had bad anxiety and panic attacks so the drama in a lot of my songs is just that. Because of that you tend to polarise every situation. I was homesick and there's a song on the second record called Trembling Leaves and there is this writer out of Reno called Walter van Clarke who called Reno the city of trembling leaves and I liked him and so I used that title. It's about this guy waiting to go home, he hitchhikes 'cus the bus was taking too long and these guys give him a ride so he gets in the back of this two door sedan and he can't get out and he ends up getting thrown in the trunk and going three states away. So basically it's just a homesick song. It's just a dramatic expression of that. I wish I could figure it out as it would be nice to write some kind of Garth Brooks song so then I could make the guys some money and then maybe I wouldn't be such a sorry bastard.

This guy I grew up with once he had a really shitty home life. Everybody in his family was crazy. He was pretty straight and tried really hard to do well in school and be normal. He dressed real straight and was a really good guy but he would admit to anything. That the Mom came home at 1 every night drunk that one sister was in Juvie and his brother was trying to be a pimp. He would admit that to me but by doing so he was totally free of it. I've always been kind of that way with the songs. I used to feel so nervous playing in front of people I felt I may as well come out swinging with what I felt. So they could say it sucked but they couldn't say that I was a liar. So even when you hear a most depressing song you can feel that you are not alone. The most bleak songs can have that a little bit of hope in it and it will make you feel better. Especially when I was younger, it made me feel that I wasn't alone. Tom Waits has always been a saving grace for me. he could be pretty bleak, even the newer stuff like *Alice*, which is one of the darker records that I've ever heard but like Poor Edward that makes my life feel a whole lot better.

#### Are you a political person, what do you think of George Bush?

George Bush, no not for me, but my family supports him. I don't really go home now as we can't talk about it, so it tends to be pretty heated in my house. It's hard for me because I hang out with a bunch of weirdos, musicians and so on. In the suburbs now where I live every other house has a poster out on the lawn is for Kerry and there's Kerry bumper stickers everywhere. People in Portland seem really scared but once you go outside people are different. My folks, my Mom who's a pretty bright lady and her boyfriend's a bright guy they really do think that, for whatever reason, that going into Iraq was a good thing. I though it was horrendous from the start but who am I?

I'm just a guy in a little band. I just hope that Bush gets voted out. But I think it's going to be really close. The Republicians are really smart. George Bush follows his leaders and when people are scared and they try to scare you all the time and that works. we will see if people are smart enough and care enough to get out and vote. I 'm not going to leave or anything, people say I'm going to leave if he gets in but I have nowhere to go. It's funny as we do have some discussion in the band about it.

#### I was in Reno once it seemed a pretty crazy town...

I've been trying to move back there as it features a lot in my songs but it has got very expensive now. To me at any rate it encapsulates humanity, it has weakness, so many people move there because you can always get a service job there. My Mom said "that if you are sober and have a clean shirt you'll get a job". But to make any real money is hard though. So you get a lot of people, especially men, who move there and get caught in the trap of hard drinking and gambling and there's over a 100 Mom and Pop hotels within a mile radius to downtown. I used to take pictures of them most of them have fallen into disrepair and they're residentials at about 150 bucks a week. So that whole underbelly exists there. There used to be this old hotel there that had balconys from where between 7 and 9.30 you would see all these old men like ants heading for the casinos for the 50c beers and hotdogs. I've always been drawn to that aspect of it as weakness I find really interesting. When people try to be good but they can't. I try really hard to be a good person but I fuck up daily, I try not to be too insecure or to drink too much.

# Did artists like Steve Earle and Dwight Yoakam have an influence on you when they made their debut albums?

I respect Steve Earle, I've seen him maybe a half a dozen times. And I remember *Guitar Town* and Dwight Yoakam's first album came out round the same time. Dwight writes great songs, classic type songs, I saw his new band not so long ago. He still touring and putting out records and it's his own song too. I never saw him with Pete Anderson which I would have like d to have seen.

#### Your covers are quite distinctive.

Yeah a friend in Reno does all our artwork.But he's moved to Los Angeles so I've lost track of him for the moment.

#### How did the between track narration come about on Post To Wire?

Well my grandmother is my closest relative, or she was, I used to write her postcards from every town  $\Gamma d$  go to and then I would call her at the end of the week and talk about the places but I couldn't say any crazy shit to her so I started to write the crazy ones. I'm actually talking to somebody right now about doing a book of short stories and also to someone in the UK about a novel I wrote. I've always used writing as my private thing so I don't know where that will go. I'd be really excited if it happens though.

The new album *The Fitzgerald*, produced by JD Foster, has now been released to critical aclaim and a second CD of re-recordings, *Obliteration By Time*, with their favorites from the first two records plus a few previously unreleased songs, including a tribute to one of RF's favorite bands Dead Moon, and a cover of Husker Du's *Pink Turns To Blue* is also available. Vlautin's novel *The Motel Life* will be published by Faber and Faber in the spring of next year. Richmond Fontaine are currently touring in support of their new album.





MY

EDUCATION

STARTED

WITH

WHISKEYTOWX



#### Where you aware, when you were growing up of any particular roots music scene?

I first started listening to a lot of roots music that my brother was playing and he was a major fan of Neil Young, so he was someone we listened to all the time. My Dad also used to play guitar and sing in little coffee shops in Saskatchewan, in rural Canada, and he played songs like Gordon Lightfoot's all the time. He wasn't someone who I listened to much unless it was when my Dad sang his songs. Growing up Blue Rodeo became a huge musical influence, when I was about 17 or 18. And there still is a healthy roots scene in Canada, though it has been a little frustrating over the last few years, as commercial radio has really changed the recognition for roots-based music. Like my first record didn't get played on the radio at all, yet I was getting play in America and in Europe. The older acts we mentioned were still getting play because they were established in the '80's and '90's because radio then was still open and could expose those bands on a national level. But now as we're so spread out it impossible to do it by just touring.

The college radio scene is not as organised as some of the American stations, they're run by students often, who don't have a lot of money.

I had no interest in country music growing up at all, but that was because I was hearing the kind of country music that would have appealed to me. It was about finding the niche that I liked, the band that I listened to that turned me around was Whiskeytown, I heard them before I'd ever listened to, or even knew who Gram Parsons was, or Dwight Yoakam, or Steve Earle. So my education started of with Whiskeytown, and what I loved about them was the songs and the instrumentation. I mean there was a pedal steel in the band but it wasn't playing the straight country way, it was more melod-

ic than that. That was what I connected to and as time went on I started listening to everything from Steve Earle backwards, a huge umbrella of songwriters who were influenced by country music.

#### Then the direct storytelling aspect of country music must have appealed to you...

Absolutely, that was the thing that I loved about Whiskeytown, *Stranger's Almanac* was such a great record I loved they way that Ryan Adams conveyed these stories, very much in a cinematic way, imagery which I loved. And it wasn't cliched. The whole "whose bed have your boots been under" kind of thing, I couldn't give a shit about that. But they way songs were about everyday life, the way they were about something that was real to me, that was the thing.

A recent review talked about the sense of isolation in your songs. Is that a conscious element? For sure, yeah, music, as a young teenager, was one of the things that I buried myself in. Like in Korea, in downtown Seoul, where was I supposed to go? It was a strange upbringing but my brother brought me records, he brought me a Tom Petty album and I got an Annie Lennox record and I literally fed off those albums. I'd just stay in my room and listen to music.

There must be a relief in being able to play the songs from your new album having toured *Failer* for two or more years...

Yeah, about four or five years of my life revolved around ten or so songs. It became a little frustrating and repetitive and in some ways. I felt that I had moved passed those songs a long time ago. The old saying that you have your whole life to make your first record and then six months to make your second was true, Though I'd been sitting on some songs for two years before making this record.

#### Were you writing on the road while touring?

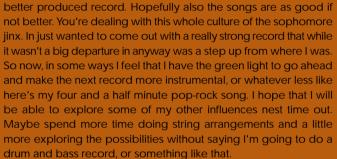
I didn't write on the road at all. I had some songs from before the first record, I wrote the lyrics for the song *Back To Me* before we even went on tour with Failer. For a long time I was writing and was just a local musician looking to put a record out.

#### You put out an EP then in 1999, were any of the songs that appear on Failer on it?

No, thankfully (laughs). Those were the first songs I'd ever written and I don't think I wish I'd never written those songs as you have to start somewhere. You have to go through that to become motivated to become a better songwriter, so I'm happy to say I have moved on since those songs.

#### Do you have any thoughts about how the next album should sound?

On this album I felt like I was out to prove that I was able to deliver a really solid roots-rock record that had a lot of the best of what my first record tended to be, but this time I wanted a better sounding,



# You recorded the album in Toronto, is there a good infrastructure in Canada?

Yes, it was much cheaper, with the exchange rate, to do it there and there are some great studios. So it would cost you three times as much to do it in the States. I worked in what I consider to be as good a studio as there is anywhere else. Plus it was only round the corner from my house which was fantastic. We mixed it in LA though.

#### With so much travel is it possible to establish a home life?

The one thing I have struggled the most with, especially since touring the last record, is that I used to live in the country and I had cats. Well I still have cats, but I don't get to see them so much. I love gardening, being in the outdoors. It's a lifestyle that is completely opposite to being on the road. I also love cooking but we end up eating in restaurants every night. I think I have come to accept that that is something that I have to put on hold. It's something that I use as the fuel to get through this, it's a part of my life that will come, but for now I'm committed to this. I enjoy this part of my life, but without sounding totally corny my dream is to have a farm and live there. I still want to play music but I would hope to eventually tour less and less. So in twenty years from now that is something that I can look forward to and to inspire me to work really hard now to achieve that.

In that context has the longevity of the career of someone like Lucinda Williams been an inspiration? Her career has been very different from mine. We came out at very different times. I feel that being compared to her has, at times, been a double-edged sword in that it is a huge compliment in that people mean it in a positive way, but having said that I also would hate to think that I'm just trying to follow in her footsteps. I didn't actually hear her music until *Car Wheels On A Gravel Road*, she wasn't someone I listened to growing up. I was 18 when I heard Whiskeytown so then over the next four years this world of music opened up with people like Peter Bruntnell, Richard Buckner, Wilco to Elvis, Dusty Springfield.





Your music has changed with the move to Sugar Hill and away from a major label. It has become harder and more rock orientated was that your intention?

At the moment. After the first record some people called me a traditionalist, I'm not, I never was. That happened to be what I was into at the time. My tastes are very broad depending on what I'm interested in at that moment and that's going to effect the record I make at that time. I'm not stuck in one thing. So now I'm liking the two guitars, bass and drum thing.

#### What has the reaction been to the sound of the new album?

It's been pretty good. I don't know about numbers - I feel if it's good news someone will tell me and if it's not I'd rather not know.

#### How does being with Sugar Hill compare to being with Universal?

Well, there are some good things about it and some things that are bad. Obviously, having total creative freedom is wonderful, but I kinda had that anyway, so it's nothing new to me. They don't have as much money as Universal, but they find a way to make things work. The good thing about being with a independent label is that there are no standard ways of doing things. For instance, I wanted to put out some vinyl for *The Duel* and at Universal the answer was we don't do vinyl. At Sugar Hill they said that it sounded like a good idea and got a price for doing that to see if it was possible. There's more of a give and take there. It's not as much of a "we own you" thing. But I didn't have that bad of an experience at Universal until at the very end.

#### Is it a long term hard slog then?

Oh absolutely, there is so much music out there as well as so many other things to take people's attention that you have to stay out there. It still beats getting a job.

#### Overall some of the Americana acts have got harder now, is that a refl of the times we live in?

I think that we need some more protest songs now. Steve (Earle) has a few.

#### And you?

Well there are a couple of songs on the Duel but I got so mad after the election I decided to not to do it anymore for awhile. The election gutted me. I can't believe that 51% of Americans voted for George W Bush again. But I felt that the people who voted for him didn't do so because they supported the war, they ended up voting for him for what they believed were moral reasons. In many ways it was an election that was about religion and abortion issues. I liked John Kerry and I don't think enough people gave him a chance. And I would really like it if my President was smarter.

# Back to the music, on this tour supporting Steve Earle you are playing solo is that a new thing for you?

It's a totally new experience. I have done a lot of shows with just another guitar player but this is the first time up there by myself. It has been very challenging but also very liberating. If a random song suddenly comes into my head then I can just do it. I do miss being with my band and I'd love to have them though.

#### Singing with a loud band has that effected your singing?

No, but it has become stronger, I enjoy belting it out.

#### Who would be your influences for this harder sound?

Oh God, a lot of things... I love the Faces, I love Neil Young a lot of that kind of thing has ben influential. I studied those records a lot and it's coming through in what I'm doing now. I'm a huge Neil Young fan, not



just for the music but also for the way he goes about doing things. He has remained vital for more than 35 years, and that's not easy to do. You have to be at the top of your game to stay important.

#### How vital is the mus

I have decided that it's what I do. I don't want to do anything else. And so, since it is my work I have to be very dedicated and disciplined about it, more so now than ever. I'm entering a new phase now where I'm more serious about it than I have ever been. It's not that I think what I do is important for the world but it is important for me. It helps me become the person I'm supposed to be in the world, which I know sound kind hippy-dippy but...

#### With this new attitude do you have a gamenlan.

I don't see a reason for a gameplan because I think they're laughable. You can try to plan and there's nothing wrong with that but you never know what's going to happen, especially in the music business. You can struggle for years and then all of a sudden BOOM!

With a lot of good new indie labels now do you think there is a new level of creativity about, if with smaller budgets?

Absolutely, and with major labels too these days they are tightening their belts. Music is just not the most important thing with a lot of people anymore. Even at a touring level there are so many other options available to people. And when you are asking them to put down half a day's pay for a ticket, that's a lot. So if I have a off-night I get unhappy about it.

#### So how tough are you on the band if they are having a off night.

I don't want it to be an employer relationship, I'm always friends with my band. Every time I get on the bus or van I want it to be Honeysuckle Rose, I've always been that way. I really want that family vibe because it makes for great music. It makes the highs higher and the lows lower but that's life.

#### Has you approach to writing changed too.

I'm not really writing because I've been playing and also sleeping. In reality though I'm always writing in some way, just not sitting down

with a guitar. I've always got something going in my head, I have a note book with me and I'm always trying to figure something out. Some sort of song form in my head, for whatever's in there.

#### You made a DVD of the live show for your last album, how did that come about?

I really enjoyed making that record even though it was a huge undertaking. It was pretty much a thrown together thing in that the day before we did it we decided to film it. I think it turned out really well and is a good representation of where I was at the time. Now I feel I'm leaps and bounds beyond that.

#### You worked with RS Field on that, will you work together on the next album:

You know I don't know what I'm going to do next is the answer to that question. We get along great and he's very talented and I love him dearly. I'm just trying to be where I am right now and enjoying the moment. Being around Steve is really good. I do some songs in his show with him and someone said we really sound good together and I said I should do " I've been practising his stuff for eighteen years". I was fourteen when Guitar Town came out and it really was one of those pivotal records, that and the Dwight Yoakam record that came out around then also. They made me interested in country music again. I grew up with that but in your teenage years you don't want to listen to what your parents are listening to. I was very into The Replacements, REM, Lone Justice, that type of thing. I heard Guitar Town and went what the hell is that! So from there I started working my way back to country music and it was a good time for the music.

#### Would you ever make another traditional country album?

I love country music, so maybe. Right now though I'm enjoying these shows and trying to figure out what I want to say next. When I figure that out I will then figure out the right way to say it. But I'm not in a real hurry to do it, I want to take my time and make sure that everything is as perfect as I can make it. I hope I'm going to be making records for a long time, if I'm lucky.

#### Would you ever just nut them out yourself?

No, I would never want to take that on. That is just a huge amount of work. I'm not afraid of work but I don't know where I could fit that in. What has happened is that there is now room in Nashville in the mainstream for people like us. They don't want to have anything to do with us. There's no room at radio for the alternative viewpoint. They don't cut our songs. So we have to adapt and try to find our audiences in other areas. Though *The Duel* has done better at radio than any other record I've had, it has got a lot of AAA play. I did a tour with the Drive By Truckers and they get absolutely no radio play yet they play to a full house every night, and they play big rooms like Irving Plaza in New York. Four years ago they were playing to fifty people but they worked hard and stuck at it. They are a good example of how it can be done. It's a little easier, in some respects, for a band as they don't have to pay individual players.

#### Did you ever consider becoming a hand member rather than a front person?

I've always had fantasies of being in a band but I'm not willing to give up the dictatorship. Especially being female.

Since this interview Allison has married Steve Earle, and we here at Lonesome Highway wish them both well for the future.



sarah lee guthrie and johnnie irion

Sarah Lee Guthrie comes from a prominent musical family but didn't turn to making music seriously herself till relatively recently. Following a move to L.A. she met and started performing with Johnny Irion, himself a veteran of several rock bands, including Dillion Fence with whom he had previously visited Dublin (as support to The Black Crowes). They began working as a duo, honing their songs and harmonies - and their relationship. The married later and have a daughter Olivia Nora, who travels with them. Their date in Dublin was the first of a brief European visit. We spoke to them before the played to a small but appreciative audience in Whelans.

You have released your first album under both your names on New West is that how you plan to continue? S: Well we have an option to do another record with New West, and we'll wait and see what happens with this one. We in the middle of explorations, so we're not really sure at the moment. New West is a great independent label and though there are ups and downs with any label. We've got friends on major labels whose records never even come out. We actually made this record on our own and then made the deal with New

#### Have you been preparing new material for that next project?

West. So we didn't have an A&R person involved.

S: We collect all the time. And then when we have a chance to sit down and gather our thoughts that's when we can finally finish a song or think about working it out.

*J:* I don't really write on the road as much as I used to. I prefer to be at home and I now write a lot at the piano these days. Having the space to do it is a good thing, though we're not there a lot. But as far as the future we're definitely going to make another record with Gary Louris (of the Jayhawks and producer of the current album). He'll produce it. *S:* Or, at least, co-producing it. *J:* Something along those lines. So we intend to do that. But we don't really know about the label right now. *S:* I think it's their option isn't it!(laughs). I always wondered about that, an option - whose option is it?

#### Was using an outside producer a major difference to each of the two solo albums you did?

J: Are you asking why we got a producer? Well we learned a lot in doing those solo records for sure. But we felt that we needed someone who would be inbetween us when the fists are being thrown (laughs). S: In the beginning I was naive enough to think that I could paint my own picture. It was "this is my work and I'm going to do all of it" and nobody could persuade me otherwise. But when it didn't turn out exactly how I wanted it to I realised that having more people involved meant it was going to have more appeal. So I really become more fond of the idea of using an outside producer after doing the solos. J: Gary's a great songwriter, he's worked with Ethan Johns and with Rick Rubin, he's worked with George Drakoulias and you usually learn to take the best from those experiences and can then bring it to the table. Gary is very instrumental in getting that vocal sound, he did it for years with Mark Olsen. He knows how to do harmonies and seemed a prime candidate. And it turned out that he was thinking in those terms. S: He was thinking about producing, and we know now that the Jayhawks were thinking of taking a backseat. So it was perfect timing for him, he though it was a great idea. Johnny and I were both huge fans of his, we had this trust in him that was outside our trust of each other. It was nice to have that other shoulder to lean on.

## This album perhaps falls under the Americana heading and you have both been through a lot of musical experiences so how do you see your music developing in the future?

J: I hope with exploration we can do different things, it has to come naturally. We have to set the groundwork for where we can go. We could make a pop record or a very stripped down Carter Family style album. S: Or we could do another eclectic album that has it all. J: I hope that's what we do, but you never know.

#### You seem to be largely getting press in the Americana publications, is that your main audience?

J: I think a lot of people would like us if they knew about us. Thank god there are a handful of people out there there who enjoy tunes, harmony and good playing and performance.

## It's true that a lot of music under that heading has those attributes while some alternate rock is based more on a sound...

J: Yeah, I agree. The one thing that needs to happen is that our songs need to stand up on acoustic guitars before we even thought about adding bass and drums or anything. We tour with a band in the States, we have a rhythm section that goes out with us over there for a lot of shows. We've been doing that for about six months. We were ready to hone it down and this tour we're doing a lot of new places. Usually we'll go in acoustic the first time.

#### Has traditional country music formed a part of your influences?

*J*: Yeah, I'm a big Carter Family fan, I love the simplicity. I love the sound and the harmonies. We have a new song that is very Carter Family called *When The Lilacs Are In Bloom*. Other songs we've been writing sound very Carole King on a blues trip.

#### Do you write together or individually as a rule?

Lately we have been writing individually. But actually we finished a song together last week, the one I was just talking about. We tend to write alone and then get together and hash it out. Sarah's a great editor-in-chief. S: Cut out the edit stuff - just call me chief (laughs). J: When we've sat down and tried to write songs from the ground up it's been fairly disastrous. S: Yeah, it hasn't really worked. I think greatness comes from a lonely mind. We lock each other in rooms and say "finish that song". I'll take the kid you write the song.

#### Where based you based now?

J: We have a place in South Carolina but it looks like we're getting ready to build a house in Massachusets. Hopefully we will be able to go back and forth like we have been doing. But we spend so much time on the road. Then Sarah's got family in Florida and I've got family in the south. S: Most of my family is in Mass. J: And in Oklahoma we have family and friends all over. S: It ridiculous but it's great. I've met so many relatives on the road that I never even knew about. My Dad knew them but since we're touring I get to meet them too.

#### Ronnie: Did you get to meet a lot of musicians growing up?

S: Only the ones who came to the house. I'm the last of four. Guys like Hoyt Axton and Rambling Jack Elliot were really good family friends. The Dillards were around a lot also. Doug Dillard and my Mom were best friends. J: I loved all the stuff the Dillards did with Bernie Leadon. S: I saw them at a festival a while back which was the first time I'd seen them since I was a kid and I'd forgotten how funny Mitch is.

### Ronnie: Hearing that music growing up did it alienate you from that kind of music or how did you see it?

S: I didn't pay too much attention to it either way. I went my own way anyhow. You tend to go the opposite way to your parent's music and then later you end up coming round.

#### Do you guys like to rock out?

S: Yeah we do. I caught the bug. Johnny had already been through it with earlier bands but I played acoustic music from the outset. We played four years just acoustic guitars, then last year I picked up an electric. And it's FUN. J: We really have a blast. It's nice to do the harmonies over the Gretsch.

#### How has Europe been for you?

S: I love the audiences, it's been great. They seem much more appreciative than some of our jaded crowds back home. They eat nachos, drink beer and talk all the time! So it's nice to have an audience that listens.

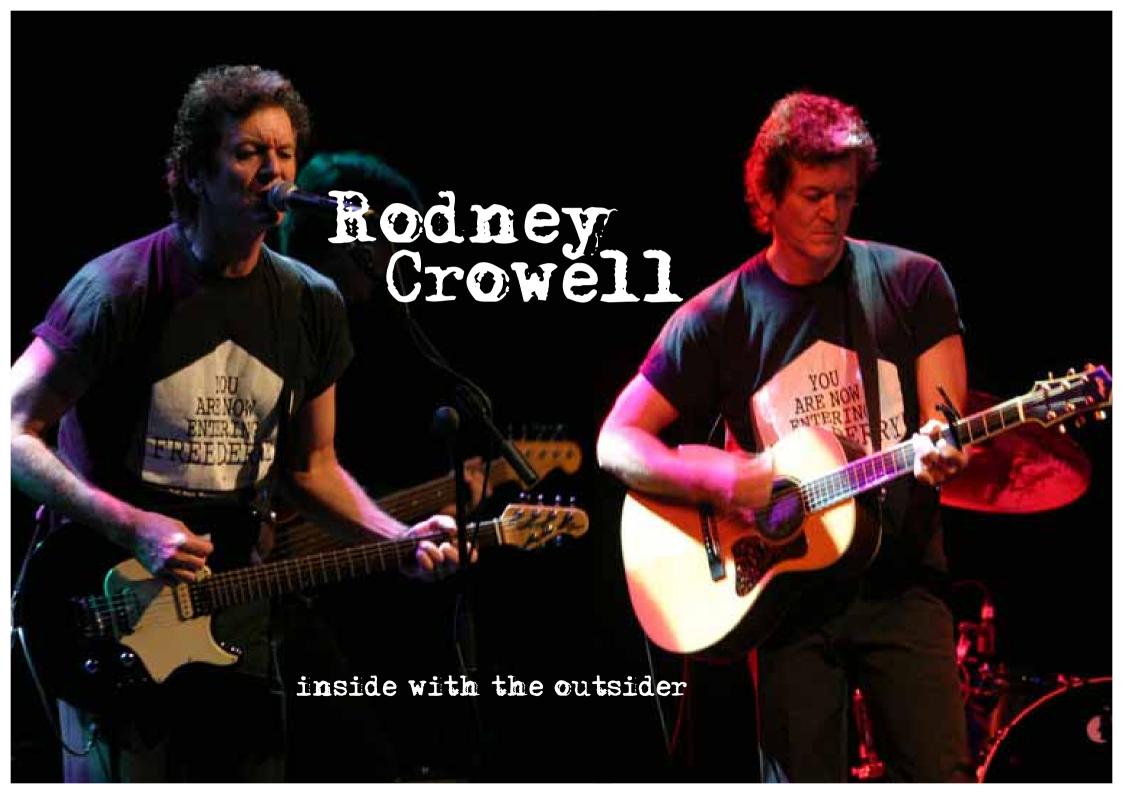
#### Do you play a lot of festivals, like Merlefest, back home?

J: Yes, we're actually doing Merlefest next year. S: We did a lot of great festivals this year.

#### Ronnie: Are you expected to pay homage to you lineage?

S: We do but not in such an obvious way. J: I just watched No Direction Home, the Bob Dylan documentary and those audiences, can be very narrow minded and were pretty unfair to Bob. R: It was the same reaction here when he played, half the audience walked out at the second set. S: I'd be horrified. J: Were they mad! We then talked about the way that Dylan would do takes in the studio with little or no prior rehearsal. J: Sarah's Dad is classic example of that way of doing songs like that. S: That's how I learned.

Interview by Steve Rapid with Ronnie Norton



# How much of an outsider do you feel, at this particular time, in your home country?

Odd you should ask that, but... quite a bit. The thing about the song The Outsider, from my point of view, is that in America the media really plays up the left/right, red/blue polarisation of the American consciousness. In the song, in the verses I gave voice to both left and right, then the chorus gives voice to God as the outsider. So it was never me thinking of myself, I didn't think about that perception till after the fact. Religious fundamentalism, to me, has nothing to do with God. It just tends to shove my understanding of God completely out of the picture. Then the war and the fighting and the struggle is left. It has evolved to a place where idealism so much a part of what we admired, Dylan's mysticism and John Lennon's willingness to stand up and say that The Beatles were more popular than God. in the circle that I ran around with that was idealism. But now idealism in America is still there, and as strong as it ever was because if you look at the last election it was down to 51% more voter turnout, and it was so close it was maybe down to one basket to make it different. So there's probably more idealism than ever.

But because of our idealistic president Mr.Clinton, who gave the corporations the power to consolidate everything. They rushed to own media and the media is now owned by the conservatives. So that idealism has been squelched. So God bless Steve Earle who just takes a sledgehammer and smashes that window. Unless your willing to go that far or your natural expression is different then you find that yourself on the outside. The Dixie Chicks were vilified for trying to win over their audience. When you get in front of an audience you can sense the atmosphere, and it's like "hey don't blame me I'm with you". Then their career got derailed. That's because of the media and who now owns it. We used to have this thing called the "Fairness Act", which said if there was any political view given on a radio station they had to, by law, give the opposite view also. That was yanked and that allowed the corporations in, so now the right wing point of view rules the day.



I have a friend who's wealthy and successful and who calls himself fiscally conservative and socially liberal. I was lamming on Clear Channel and those corporations and also feeling kinda sorry for myself about it and he said no wait you have to realise that whenever there's a stranglehold that's when other forms of creativity grow up around it. I think that there's a mindset that, and it's mine too, to keep doing your work, to be as honest as you can, you have to try to forge a path that those who might be interested in what I do might gravitate toward it.

# Is there a split in your audience, those who want the older work and those who have come along with the last three albums?

For all practical purposes I started over in 2001. The audience that I had amassed through the late eighties, early nineties I thought well they're not going to be there so I felt that I was going to go out there somewhat anonymous and start over. Well when I first went out there some of the old radio driven audience came and I was doing the Houston Kid, telling stories, talking about domestic violence very little of the love song thing. I mean I thought the record was very hopeful but they came and took one look and said well he's not the guy he was. At first I though "man I'm out of business" but I stayed with it and so while I wasn't fascinating, in my new incarnation, to that audience I slowly replaced them with an new one.

I had a conversation with another friend of mine and we were talking about *Bedazzelled*, the movie with Dudley Moore, and he was pouring his heart out to Pete Cooke who says to him "well I don't care". He has this stance of no emotion, no vulnerability. It's a facade. We were talking about "you know what, I'm in my fifties, I'm vulnerable but I'm also smart, I'm self aware but I'm insecure and I pursue a spiritual life. There's nothing cool about that, there's no stance to that. To live off it you just have to stay the course because the machinery at hand is not really geared to translate that. I think the people out thereare looking for something they can relate to. I mean U2 have somehow tapped into that hunger.

# After this initial trio of albums have you a plan where you might want to take your music in the future?

Well, I played a song last night called *Sex And Gasoline* which is something that I'm still writing, so sometimes I had to mumble some of the words because though I have them I still don't that there it yet. And I don't ever recall doing it like that before we tried it at rehearsals and the band just fell in behind and started picking up on it. And I thought "this feels too good" so I've been scrambling to try and finish it. But I felt "let's just play it until it becomes what it wants to be". I rarely, if ever, write lyrics to music. I usually go in with a finished song. I pretty much have to have the

language of the song solidified before I go in and record it. That's just some songwriting Ideology I developed. But the point is maybe it's now going to go somewhere I don't know. Because now I'm actually going out there and playing songs when I don't know what it is yet. I have probably written most of whatever the next album is going to be. I have actually got material for two records written. There's one that is a real pastrol, quiet record that I really want to make. But I feel I ought to follow The Outsider first, as if this record connects in a way that I think it should then I think that the *Sex And Gasoline* thing that I'm following would be more where I would go.

You came of an age where punk rock was right there. It was very immediate. While my coming of age was among writers like Townes van Zandt, Mickey Newberry and Guy Clark. It was a quieter more solitary path with these mentors that I had. Lucinda (Williams) came from that same path and Steve (Earle), it was stamped into my forehead that you write the song first. Then in the eighties when production became the thing there was the temptation to create backing tracks and then write to them, which is something that I have done successfully but I felt that I was somehow betraying my entree into that world. It's been fascinating to me how in that punk scene where the artist generous with each other and did they share their knowledge. Because for me Guy Clark was very generous but Townes was, I mean he was brilliant - a genius, but he was competitive and not about to share his gift. He never was like " here's my gift, I don't understand it, but take from it what you can". Was it the some way on the punk rock scene?

Steve: In Ireland then in the mid to late seventies there was a sense of isolation so when the Radiators started we did go looking for like minded souls and we tried to find band that we felt a kindred with and so brought The Undertones down from Derry for their first gig in the South. So yes there was a sense of a loose knit community but I can't say that that was the same in London or elsewhere. There was a competitive edge always.

Rodney: Human condition. To reverse this interview my question is awareness is an ongoing process so I wondering do you earn relevancy or do you demand it. Is it a timing issue or how to you get it, as it seem very important to me.

Steve: That's a very honest question and a difficult one. So I think that your relevance is dependent on by who and how you are listened to. We will have relevance to a lot of those people who have grown up with the band but a younger audience may find a lot more relevance, for them, in a band like Green Day. Yet that may here a song somewhere that we've written that may strike a chord with them that brings it in some way full circle so that this band has a relevance, that it's saying something that that can

related to and connected with. This may be more true of a band like the Clash who gained a wider audience that the Radiators did in their day. I think we have relevance now, if only by writing and performing good songs but I think the writing also is aware, to a degree, as is yours, of the world we live in today.

Rodney: So, in effect, you create your relevance.

Steve: Yes, I would think so. But I would love to see more of a younger element in your audience just to make them aware how good a band you have playing with you at the moment one that can rock has hard as anyone. It may come down to just how an new audience can discover you.



Rodney: So in truth it's not the artist that has lost his relevance but the delivery system.

#### The fact that you are now back on a major label is in itself reason to hope that if they do it right you can be in front of an large audience again.

Rodney: Yeah, if they do it right. Because if they don't I'm back in the indie world. I want to succeed for me, but also for John Grady, who signed me to the label. If he can go from the enormous success of Gretchen Wilson to me, or another singer/songwriter, which he did with Lucinda and the Down From The Mountain soundtrack then... well I'm a fan of his and I want him to succeed.

#### As a final question how much fun was the Cherry Bombs project to do?

The Cherry Bombs was all about fun and healing some old rifts. We knew it was never going to be something that we would all pursue as a big think in the marketplace. My only regret is that they so that the only thing that they released from it was a novelty song that Vince and I made up. But it was healing as our original drummer had died and we all got a chance to honour him. And also a couple of us had fallen out as young men do and it was a chance to hug each other.

#### Will there be any more Cherry Bomb projects?

There could be. But Vince and everybody on it is so busy with their own careers that it's hard. But it was fun.

# Though you were working with T-Bone Burnett at one point there was no production credit on the first album. Why was that?

Yes it is true that T-Bone was producing the first record. He left the project in the middle of it because of issues he was having with our label. Lets just say they were not giving him what he wanted. There was a lot of drama that I would rather not get into out of respect for all parties.

# Its eight years since the debut album. Why did it take so long to do the follow up?

It has been a long while since the first release. Well you have to understand the situation: the day that our first record was released our A&R person was fired. Our guitar player fell in love with a groupie and got her pregnant and then left the band a week before the record was released. We were forced to replace him with a not so perfect fit and then we were off on tour. It was an awful feeling knowing that the one person who actually got it at the label was just fired. We felt abandoned and we were freaking out. It was clear that no one at the label was really digging the record and I personally hated it for so many reasons but mostly because any vision I had dreamed about was destroyed after I signed my name on the line. There was always a sinking feeling in all of our guts. I went to the new head of A&R who replaced our person and said let's kill this record asap. We hung around for awhile on the label and were finally let go after all the mergers happened. I needed a break emotionally, spirtually and phyiscally. I moved to LA with my then girlfriend, now wife, and opened up a studio and started producing and writing songs for film and tv. This became a success for me but still left me wanting more. I recieved an email from a fan of the first record and he told how moved he was by it and wondering if we were working on any new material. Well I stopped for a second and thought holy-moly I really miss BBH and I have to get this machine turning again. I began reforming Big Blue Hearts with all new members. The old members of which they were only really two left had gone on to other things and I wanted fresh blood anyway. That was two and a half years ago and here we are today with our new CD in the universe. I took my sweet time making the latest record producing it all myself in my studio and giving it all the love it deserved. The band would show up and we would get to work, it was beautiful. The really cool part of the new CD is that



I co-wrote 4 songs with my film tv writing partner Dougals Soref from my production company. He was such an inspiration and really gave this record what it needed. He is a true poet and he and I are very much in the same frame of mind, hopeless romantics

# After the problems at the label with the first album you moved to LA. Was that a considered move to begin anew?

I moved to LA because my wife was going to grad school at UCLA to get her MBA.

Do the comparisons between you and Chris Isaac, Raul Malo and yourself as essentially singers in the Roy Orbison something that irks or do you see it as logical?

To be mentioned in the same sentence as any of them is awesome!!!! I don't mind comparissons at all, we as humans need them.

# Your music has a strong structural melodic base that is at odds with a lot of rock music is that deliberate?

That is just natural I really don't think about it at all while I'm arranging a song. I try to look at it like a film. It has a start a conflict and yet more conflict then tension and then finally a beautiful resolve.

# How does the influence of Motown and punk fit into your musical make-up?

I really don't know but I would say that both Mowtown and Punk Rock gave me my soul.

Why did you want to record Dreaming Of A Woman again? Because I love that song like a mother loves her child and I had to save it from the horrible way it was recorded in the first place.

#### Over the last few years do you feel that the time is right now to release your new album?

Well now that we have started our own record company "Eagle Eye Records" we really don't care if the time is right. When you play the kind of music we do one thing is for certain, you are not riding any train or trend. I mean main stream radio will never play it because it's too "Country" but country radio will never play it because it's not "Country" enough, you can't win. The "Americana" world has grown some since our first CD but it's still not big enough to shoot any artist into the stratosphere. Our only thing that we want to do is bring our music to the people in the most organic grassroots way and that my friend is all about touring, touring, touring.

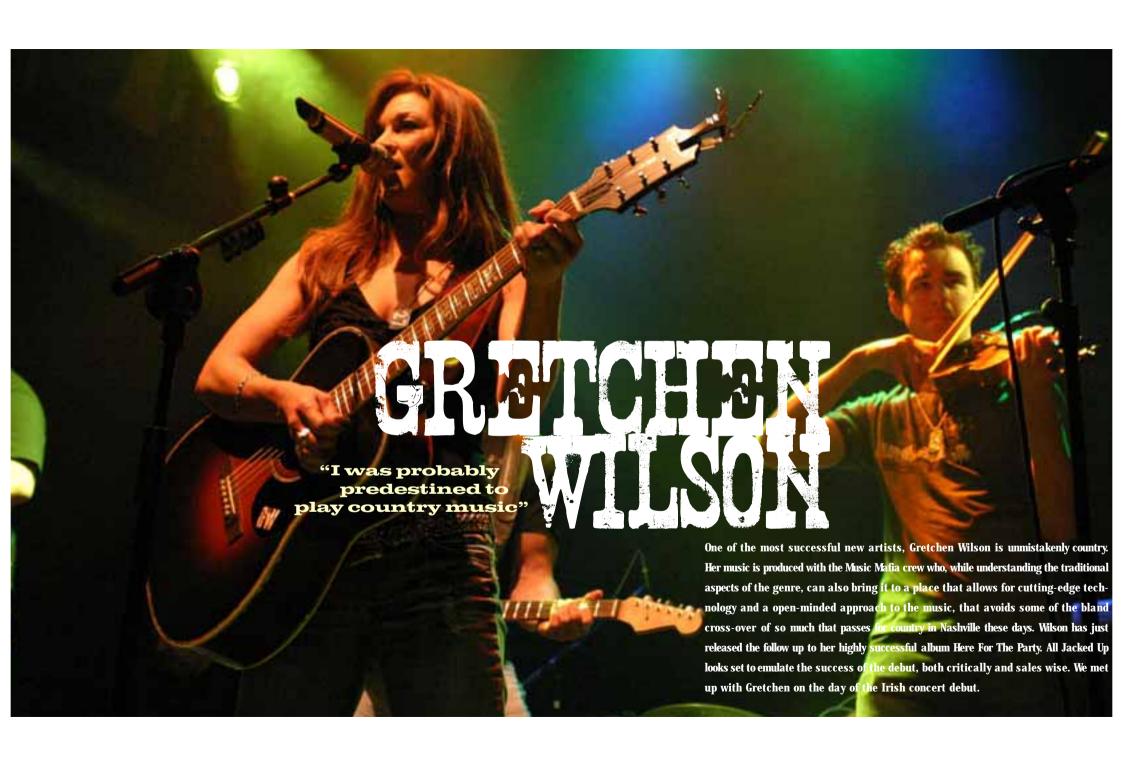
# Have you stored up a lot of material in the time between the two albums and what inspires your writing?

I have enough material for four more records right now. Not only do I have my own songs but Douglas is bringing me more songs then I can possibly handle, he suffers from being prolific.

# What does the future hold for you now? Is it easy to balance being a father and being a musician?

The future is a funny thing because when you're where I am in my life it can really excite you or scare the soul out of you. I live my life one day a time, sweet Jesus.

Interview by Steve Rapid





# Given that though, you seem to be open to using whatever new technology is out ther if it enhances the music.

To be perfectly honest with you over the course of the last year, having been involved with multi-genre award shows and things like that I have been exposed to a lot of different music that I hadn't listened to before or been interested in and everytime I'm around something like that I learn something from it. Then it allows me to incorporate something creatively into my own music.

# So the kind of sea change that Emmylou Harris' Wrecking Ball album was for her may be something that you would consider down the road?

I'm not sure. We are experimenting a little bit already on the next record, we're finding different pieces of me that I can show rather than just being a redneck woman. The next record will have some amazing surprises on it, things that you wouldn't have expected, but thing that are very much about who I am.

That are a lot of preconceptions as to what country music is these days, and an element of country with a hard rock edge is a part of the genre that is sometimes overlooked.

That's what I feel, my band is a country band but we rock, and we rock hard. I tell my soundman that I want my show to have the same energy as a rock show. But we are still playing country music.

# How do you feel about the idea then of there being these international de-countrified mixes of your single?

Actually I would be happy if we could just always leave the record as it is. In some countries there is not even a dedicated country music station. So I can understand the need for it more in that if a station has to play my song right up against, say, Elton John. I understand that it has to fit in. So I'm not totally opposed to tweaking it to see something fit in more on an international level. But when it comes to country radio it should be the record we intended. Because when we go into the studio we set out to make the best record we can and I'm very much involved with the making of the record and with the final mixes and I feel that when I'm satisfied enough to say that it's done then it should stay that way. Up to a couple of years ago and over the last ten years or so a lot of artist's went in that crossover direction. Even the non-international stuff coming out of Nashville sounded less country. That was where country went for a little while. And some of those artists will stay that way because that's who they are. I don't think a record company should tell an artist which way to go, but if that's where their heart takes them, then that's who they are.

# The Umbrella of country can cover a whole gamut of idea...

And that umbrella now is wider than it's ever been. With my record doing as well as it has and with Big & Rich coming out, my friends, and they are so vastly different to anything else out there that I don't think that you have to pidgon-hole it. I don't think that it has to have a steel guitar to be country. The bottom line is that good music is good music. We should worry a lot less how to label it and just like what we like.

#### The Music Mafia seem to becoming stronger.

It's very varied with some great musicians involved. My guitar palyer Dean Hall (Tom T Hall's son) is going to be a big star in his own right. The cool thing about all of us in the Music Mafia is that none of us are the same. We all have very different upbringings and grew up with different kinds of music. And that's one of the coolest things about when we do get together and play or write songs. Which brings up what I said earlier about being influenced by things that you hadn't heard before. I learn a lot from those guys. And likewise I hope that they can say that learnt something new from me.

# A lot of your songs seem to have a strong autobiographical emphasis, is that your role in the songwriting process or how to you like to work within that?

Songwriting is something I didn't really get into until I moved to Nashville, I didn't know I could write songs as I'd never sat down and completed a song on my own. But I found out later that a lot of people don't write songs alone, in fact only a few are talented enough to write a masterpiece on their own. It is really hard when you don't have someone to bounce ideas off. Someone to criticize or tell you that "that's a great idea" or not. Sometimes you write something and when

you lok at it later you feel totally different about it and someone else can help assess it in a different light. When I sit down I do both I come up with a lyric and I also do chord changes and melody and so do the other people I work with. It's kinda like everybodies in. We all sit together with our instruments and we all add to the song. Most of the songs I've written are about my life or experiences or things that I have been close to or witnessed first hand.

#### You are part of the Nashville community now?

I live just outside of Nashville now. It's a place that's full of a lot of talented people. I don't get to go out a lot these days though. From the guitar player at Legends, playing two sets everyday, to the demo singers and musicians, there is a lot of raw talent there. I was part of that, doing demos, up until I got my record deal. But in order to get by I took a job as a cocktail waitress in a bar and I ended up sitting in with the house band there to get that side of me out of my system.

#### Is a wider European audience important to you right now?

Yeah, I would love to work over in Europe. I have been to a lot of places, some I liked better than others so there are some places I'm not going to look forward to going back to but there are other places I've fallen in love with already. Ireland being one of them. It is what you make it. I can't say what's going to happen but if everybody likes me enough here I do want to come back.

Interview by Stephen Rapid, with Ronnie Norton



# Rolling Stone: "Blue Rodeo is already a major band in Canada. The truth is the group is a major band everywhere, only most of the world doesn't know it yet."

Rolling Stone magazine knows a thing or two about music over the years and while Blue Rodeo has become an institution in their home country of Canada, they continue to occupy cult status in the USA. It could also be said that the same is true of Europe where their music attracts rave reviews from pockets of admirers across the continent. Essentially Blue Rodeo is propelled by the song writing skills of Greg Keelor and Jim Cuddy, two brothers in music, who met in high school in Toronto and played in a variety of bands together before forming Blue Rodeo in 1984. At the time Toronto was a melting pot of differing musical influences and a hotbed for emerging talent. The quality of their music over the last 21 years is a testament to the ability of Blue Rodeo to constantly change their focus and challenge both themselves and their audience to grow along the musical path that has emerged.

Twelve records over 21 years, including a double live set and a greatest hits collection. Add in a number of solo projects over this time and we get the picture of a consistently strong catalogue of work that has more than stood the test of time. Their sound is strangely familiar, clearly identifiable, always original and ever evolving.

Lonesome Highway recently caught up with Greg Keelor during the Ontario leg of the band's Canadian tour. The following is an extract from the conversation that ensued:

The creative scene that was Queen Street West, Toronto in 1984. Can you tell me about the influence it had in the development of Blue Rodeo?

We left Toronto in 1981 as a Punk/Pop band and over 3 years in NYC we felt that the music we were making was a little bit superficial. Jim and I had been listening to a Cow/Punk thing going on in NYC. There was great resonance in the melody of the music and it seemed to be the place to put the energy we wanted in our sound. Great songs were being played with great harmonies and vocals and I wanted to push things a little bit.

We wanted to live a little deeper, dig in a bit and have more resonance in the songs we were writing. We decided to return to Toronto and we played our 1st gig in a bar called the Cameron Hotel. All the bohemians, artists, musicians hung out there at the time. Everyone was learning how to play guitar differently and listening to Gram Parsons and Johnny Cash. It was a singer/songwriter thing and wanting to write a different type of song.

#### Was your sound veering towards country at that time?

Yes, pretty much so. Our first gig was support to a band called the Handsome Ned's who played a type of amphetamine country music. They were guys who had been in punk bands but they did country also. It was about learning different licks and getting away from the punk/pop sound of playing everything loud and fast at that time.

Can I ask you about the name? Where did the name Blue Rodeo come from? It wasn't any one thing. It was a number of influences at the time. You can't go too wrong with the word 'Blue'



# BLUE RODEO NO CHIFFON OR FAKE HAIRDOS

Congratulations on the 21st Birthday of the band. It has been some success story

Thank you. It's a strange time in life. When you think of all the great bands that have not lasted this long...

How has the body of work endured over this time?

There are some songs that go all the way back to our time in NYC.

I still enjoy singing a lot of the stuff. It has survived pretty well. Also, we play live so much that I go through phases where the songs I write are viewed sometimes as confessional little prayers. Then there are times when you are writing songs for an audience that are going to be played by the band in large arenas. You have got to have songs that hold some meaning for you, that have some resonance. It better have something that will work in your brain if you have to sing the song night after night.

#### Do you like the label Americana?

I don't like the term. I don't like the nationalistic arrogance of it and for the most part it describes amateurish doodling with some sort of bleak outlook. It is not my bag.

The rebellion and revolution of Elvis & Dylan in the 50's & 60's put music on a track... Is that vitality present today in country music on the airways?

We are in a time of chiffon and fake hairdos. Everybody has a cowboy hat. It is insincere and industrialised song writing with cookie cutter, production line music. The songs are not very good. There is no real feeling, there's no width in the songs; no true sadness or redemption and it all seems very superficial. But then this is a sign of our times

How do you keep the freshness and vitality within the band? The core has not changed much over time with Basil Donovan on Bass augmenting you and Jim from the start in 1984. I have counted only 7 changes in musicians that have come and gone over the years.

I think it is something that still means a lot to us. We all love the experience of playing music. The magic comes from a group of people who play their instruments together and the song is lifted out Yes, there is freshness to having new members join. Getting a new girlfriend every once and awhile does tend to add a new blush to things.

Do your travels into Europe add to this feeling of redefining your parameters again?

It's a challenge and a lot of fun to come over and play new territories. It keeps us alive to a new challenge and we get to carry our own guitars and amps for a change. There is no way we could do it in Canada so it is a chance to look at things through new eyes.

Is there a pressure from your celebrity status in Canada?

No. The popular culture in Canada has always been one of anti-celebrity. That may be changing now but it is not a real problem. From time to time I might have somebody ask to buy me a beer but it doesn't get any more intrusive than that.

So, there we have it... It may be country but not as you have ever heard it before. Did I hear a touch of Elvis in there? I definitely hear Roy Orbison and perhaps a taste of the Beatles or the Byrd's? Did somebody mention the Band? And weren't they mostly Canadian?

All groups are shaped by a wide range of disparate influences Sometimes I hear the Doors or 60's psychedelia in the extended guitar & keyboard instrumental passages. Then again, it may be the rhythm n' blues and sweet soul sound of other influences that mix into the unique sound of Blue Rodeo. I only know that when Jim Cuddy plays harmonica and Greg Keelor hits those lonely guitar chords, you can almost see Woody Guthrie jump another train to somewhere around the bend...

Interview by Paul McGee

#### Audrey Auld Mezera Texas Reckless Records

This is Audrey's first album since getting married, hence the addition to her name It finds her in good voice and looking more outward than on her previous albums. This apparent from the first track Love You Like The Earth, but equally her writing touches on darker moods such as her take Mary Gauthier song's about Karla Faye, who found faith before her institutionalized death. It's the only outside song but fits the album completely as Audrey sings about heroes like Woody Guthrie (Woody) and Billy Joe Shaver (Billy). There are also touching songs of loss like Hole In My Life (an album highlight) as well as those dealing with separation (Missing Mez) and affection, all are delivered in a convincing voice that is flexible enough to accomodate the album's varying moods. These songs are underscored by the simplicity of the musical settings. Devoid of drums, they convey the moods effectively and atmospherically. Co-produced by Audrey and Gabe Rhodes it has a much needed human touch and is the kind of positive album that is in short supply these days. With players like Bill Chambers and Carrie Rodriguez, the playing is spot on. Auld Mezera fans will love it and the rest of you would do well to get in touch.

#### Irene Kelly Thunderbird Rounder Europe

Another singer/songwriter who touches on that acoustic/bluegrass setting but who has expanded on that is Irene Kelly, whose second album, while it doesn't guite better her debut, is nonethe-less full of good moments. The opening song is co-written by Kelly and longtime friend and supporter Claire Lynch, is a strong opening statement and features the vocals of both writers to good effect. Elsewhere the music broadens out and at times reminds me of the earlier albums of Hal Ketchum. Maybe as co-producer (with Kelly) Scott Neubert played on those early Ketchum albums that shouldn't be too much of a surprise. Kelly has written or co-written all of the songs here and is a strong songwriter who gives the material the delivery they need. She has a strong clear voice that conveys the moods of the songs well. She has some strong players on board and such harmony singers like Jon Randall Stewart and Rodney Crowell. The former is excellent on the title track, an album highlight. My favourite song here is the sole song written by Kelly on her own, Comin' Back From The Moon.

#### Redbird Redbird Signature Sounds

Even more resolutely acoustic is this album from Redbird, collectively solo artists Kris Delmhorst, Jeffrey Foulcault and Peter



Mulvey with David Goodrich. They recorded this largely in a home-setting around one microphone direct to DAT. So it understandably has a loose, relaxed and intimate feel with all members sharing vocals and instrumental duties. The songs are largely covers, with a single contribution from each participant. Songs range from REM's You Are The Everything, Dylan's Buckets Of Rain to WB Yeats's Down By The Sally Garden. And while I can't say that everything here hit home, Delmhorst's take Ry Cavanaugh's Lighthouse Light and the aforementioned REM and Yeats songs have affecting rough edge that works.

#### The Hickmen California Dreamin' Justbobs

The amps get turned up on this album, the band got their name from working with Johnny Hickman of Cracker. They play muscular roots rock on a series of songs that deal with the suburban sprawl situation and also some directly confrontational issues with songs like *True*, *Blue*, *Red American*. It's arrival also answered a question about a band I used to listen to back in the Eighthies who recorded for Elektra called The Unforgiven, as three of that band are present here. The music has a rough, loose, Stones-ish swagger that is tempered with some sun-hardened twang. But on songs like *In A Fever*, *Father Winter* and *Last Train Tonight* they

lay back a little and let the tempo sit back but without losing the edge. The also do humour on *Costco Socks*, a song that might lose in translation as we don't have Costco stores, but you get the message anyway. Likewise there is an intended irony on the NRA inspired *I Gotta Gun*. By way of variety there is something of a Pogues lilt to the racous *Envy* which features a vibrant fiddle riff. The vocals have a rough edge feel that has seen comparisons to Steve Earle and Chris Knight and though that is valid they don't sound like either. The Hickman are making a point but doing it with a sense of humour and above all having fun while doing it.

#### Jim Bryson The North Side Benches Orange

This latest album from Canadian singer/songwriter was released in 2003 but when he toured here with Kathleen Edwards he brought copies with him. It is an excellent album that showcases his intelligent songwriting and expressive voice. It's one of those albums that, while it has individual songs that hit you, like the melodic pop sensibilities of opening song Sleeping In Toronto, works best as a whole body of work. Produced by Bryson and Ian LeFeuvre it is full of interesting textures brought into the songs by backing band The Occasionals. They include a range of keyboards including Wurlitzer, pump organ as well as Mellotron samples, there's twelve and six string as well as e-bow guitars. All of which serve the songs to good effect from the aforementioned opening track to the athmospheric stripped down closer *Broken Fingers* and taking in the rockin' Mean Streak as well as my favourite track Somewhere Else, a song that features Blue Rodeo's Jim Cuddy on vocals. All round a good album (with a good cover) that has roots elements but has a wider remit and soundscape. Check Jim out at www.jimbryson.org

#### Kathleen Edwards Back To Me Independent

After the success of Failer there may have been a worry about the follow up but, though there have been reservation expressed about the louder guitars, this is a more than worthy successor. This time guitarist Colin Cripps produces the record and as anyone who's seen the live shows will testify he is integral to the music and its tough-edged delivery. It is good to hear a whole range of different female singer/songwriters unafraid to mix it with the boys. Anne McCue, Tift Merritt and Gina Villalobos are all as different from each other as they are from Lucinda Williams, often seen as figurehead of these tough love tales. Edwards has gained confidence as a singer and writer also and these song can run from the pedal steel-backed

athmospherics of *Pink Emerson Radio* through the brass arrangements of *Somewhere Else*. These are songs that observe and obsess and *Back To Me* is roots rock that, well, to use the cliche rocks. This is Kathleen Edwards establishing a base from which she can take her music in many directions, but once it is grounded in the kind of reality it envisions here, will be worth tracking its trajectory.

#### Paul Chesne Wet Dog Man Self-Released

This oddly attractive record features a bunch of California players and guests including Skip Edwards, Dave Roe and Keith Gattis, all alumni of Dwight Yoakam's band, which should come as no surprise as it is produced by Mitch Marine, who is currently Dwight's drummer of choice. The combination of Marine's concise, clear production and Chesne's strong songs and voice make for a album that continues to draw you back to it. Songs like Something About Her have the ability to catch you off guard but also to delight. It has to be said that this is not really a country or even alt, album but rather has its own voice. Kinda like a dark side Jonathan Richman (but that's not even close). Not that there isn't a underlying roots aspect in the playing, because there is, most obviously on Old And Gray which features Charlie Rich style piano and pedal steel. This is one of those albums that comes out of left field with no expectations whatever and proves to be a cracker. Wet Dog Man stand there and shakes itself into your consciousness and tries to make love to your leg, which is gyrating to the music anyhow. You'll have to get this from www.paulchesne.com

#### Mark Miller Dodson Chapel Self-Released

Former frontman with The Ex-Husbands, Mark Miller, is now playing bass with BR549 and adding his strong voice to that band's collective strengths. This solo albums features some tracks with the Ex-Husbands as well as a bunch of songs where Miller plays all the instruments himself. The first of these Garden Of Weeds is a great song that talks of the garden of life with a simple, direct fuzzed guitar backing. Other standouts include Shiny Shoes, which features Buddy Cage on steel and shows off Miller's expressive vocals. Or the strong vocal chorus that starts the title song, which also features some understated accordion interludes. These are tales of excess and regret, all from Miller himself, except for the bonus cut of Bo Diddley's Pills, which if you're a fan of The New York Dolls, as I am, owes as much to their version as to Bo's, and suggest Miller's own roots. If you like your country ragged but true then this album will not doubt please you as much as it does me. www.millerhere.com

Jimmie Dale Gilmore Come On Back Rounder

An album of classic country's songs that Jimmie Dale has, as he explains in the sleeve note, recorded in tribute to and as a memorial to his late father. It is a gem, a beautifully realised collection of memorable songs that Gilmore puts his heart and soul into and will delight any of his many fans. The production and arrangements by his friend and band mate Joe Ely are sympathetic and singularly effective. Anyone who wants a lesson in giving new life to a vital and now often overlooked form should give this a listen. Which is not to take away in any way from Jimmie's own powerful songwriting but this is music that is timeless and intrinsically soulful delivered in a voice that is so unique and pure honky tonk. Even those who love the versions by Lefty Frizzell, Jim Reeves, Hank Snow, Marty Robbins or Johnny Cash (amongst others) will find much to savour and enjoy here too. A labour of Love.

#### Willie Nelson Countryman Lost Highway

Recorded way back in the late 90's this has remained on the shelf for some time and is coming out now on his new label and is getting some mixed reactions indeed. Some have called it his best album in ages while others have dismissed it as a lost opportunity. I feel that it is entirely listenable and depending on your liking for reggae itself may depend on how much you will like this. Willie, as always is Willie and gives his usual distinctive vocal delivery. The duet with Toots Hibbert on *I'm A Worried Man* is an album standout and a couple more duets with other reggae greats may have given it more spice. I don't see it as his best album, but I did enjoy it on a couple of levels. And with Don Was at the production helm you can expect nothing less than a pristine sound and strong musical performances. I think it's good to finally have it out now as it gives you the chance to make up your own minds on it.

Kate Campbell Blues and Lamentations Large River Music Campbell is going from strength to strength with her back catalogue being revised again and her recent albums, including the countyfied Twang On A Wire, have all been good. Now her latest album takes on the blues as it basis, not that the sound has changed from before in any dramatic way, as witnessed by the opening Miles Of Blues which is, as is much of the album, acoustic in nature. Campbell's growing confidence in her voice makes it assured and alluring. Even when paired with such notable singers as Guy Clark, Verlon Thompson, Maura O'Connell or Cindy Walker. The songs, largely written by Campbell solo or with co-writes like producer Walt Aldridge are well realised and delivered. Campbell has a crystal clear voice that is well suited to the musical setting. Some of the older songs such as Pans Of Biscuits

or the more bluesy *Mining Camp Blues*, with its subtle brass background, are album standouts. This is the album that may bring Campbell to a wider audience and one she deserves.

#### The Knitters The Modern Sounds Of... Zoe

Back with their second album (the first came out in 1985) the band, including ex-X's John Doe, Exene Cervenka and D.J. Bonebrake as well as Dave Alvin and Jonny Ray Bartel return to the sound of that classic album that turned a lot of punkers onto to the energy of country music. All know their classic country and build onto that base with some covers including the oft-covered Albert Brumley's Rank Stranger, Jimmy Driftwood's Long Chain On and an odd but interesting cover of the Steppenwolf classic Born To Be Wild. There's also seven songs written by various band members that all featured their slightly off-kilter but appealing approach to the music. Alvin delivers some fine guitar and the rest of the band are right up there behind him. The vocals are handled as before by Doe and Cervenka and give the Knitters their distinctive vocal attitude and roots energy. Those who liked either X or the bands previous outing will enjoy this one too, though some have questioned its relevance now, in reviews. I think it achieves what it set out to do in giving the band a second outing and a new lease of life.

#### John Trudell & Bad Dog Live at Fip Fargo

Native American activist, poet and musician John Trudell has released numerous records before and here in a live setting mixes his spoken word song/poems with traditional chanting from Quiltman and some atmospheric guitar and keyboard backings. This is all well summed up on the opening track *Crazy Horse*. The rest of the album follows a similar pattern that will either delight the listener or bore them. Personally I found it a enjoyable and rewarding experience with Trudell's words well worth listening to for an expression of Native American attitude, or at least a part of it. delivered for those who still see a link and lineage to their own culture and circumstances. Recorded live for a French radio session it has a energy that is strong and striking.

#### Blue Rodeo Are You Ready? Rounder

Their success in their native Canada has yet to translate to Europe, or even the US. Yet their music is world class, and it is straight down the line, full of hooks, fine harmonies and dynamic playing on a series of memorable, original songs that touch all the right bases. Again it seems to be a case of their not being any channels that would expose this music to a wider appreciative audience. The music touches on beat group basics, on Nick Lowe style invention, on Squeeze-ish sophistication, on classic

brother harmony, on solid songwriting and touches of roots/country overtones. Listen to *Rena*, listen to *Beverley Street*, hell they even have tin whistle and uilleann pipes on *Phaedra's Meadow*. So what's keeping you from checking this mighty band out especially now that this album is available from your local store, go down and listen to it at least you'll know them, and maybe come to love them. Are you ready?

# **Shannon McNally and Neal Casal** *Ran On Pure Lightning* Fargo

The enterprising French label have picked up on this minialbum from two artists who have, in their own way been making waves with their work. Casal has a larger body of work to get acquainted with while McNally is receiving a lot of praise for her current album. The opening *Pale Moon* features McNally's lead vocal over Greg Leisz pedal steel and Benmont Tench's piano to great effect, *Fierce Little Bird* is Casal's opening gambit and he takes the lead with McNally coming in with strong harmonies. And so it goes on the eight tracks featured, with some diversions, *Sunset Flood* being a Leisz pedal steel instrumental and *Alachua County Boogie* being a short piano boogie, as the title suggests, from Tench. Released in the States in 2002 this is an good little album well worth seeking out.

#### Creosote Blacksmoke Now Publishing Now

Recorded in the famed Wavelab Studio in Tucson (Calexico) Creosote have that parched and desert sun-drenched sound down pat. Essentially this is roots music that is rock orientated and country flavoured. The songs come from singer Jason Steed, who along with Dan Burke, also co-produced the album. Those songs have a hard-edged and driven sound that pushes them along on a wave of barbed guitar and righteous pedal steel. Calexico's Joey Burns joins the other fine musicians on upright bass. Steed's voice has a lived and love-lost quality that imbues the songs with a realism that rings tried and true. Witness the Ballad Of Whiskey and Tears. Then there are a couple of uptempo songs like 85 and Hardly Can Remember which sit alongside the steel led reflective moments of My Memory and the contemplative Wichita Savior or the plaintive harmonica introduced Texas Stars, which ends with some telling emotive guitar. Steed's songs are not the linear tales of old country, rather the are filled with incisive introspection worth investigating. (www.nowpublishingnow.com)

Jefferey Halford and The Healers Railbirds Shoeless

For his latest album Halford's Healers are joined by a host of

guest musicians who include Chuck Prophet and Augie Meyers. But that only adds to the overall feel rather than distracting from the core unit. It's most concise on *Carmalina* with just bass, drums and Halford on guitars. This is robust roots music that runs from such strong songs as *South Of Bakersfield* to the tough twang-toned *Rent To Owen* which also features Augie Myers distinctive Vox Continental and Chuck Prophet's distorted vocal stylings. The title song is a much more stripped down sound that has a underlying sadness. On *Halfway Gone* things get funkier with Myers on B3 and Prophet back on wah-wah guitar. All of the songs are written or co-written by Halford except for a swampish cover of Harry Nilsson's *Jump Into The Fire* and Halford has progressed from his last album defining his sound into one that should readily appeal to the likes of John Hiatt fans. (www.jefferevhalford.com)

#### John Hiatt Master Of Disaster New West

Speaking of whom, he's back with his latest release and he's on form. That distinctive voice wraps itself around eleven tracks which have a more expansive and warmer sound that his recent albums. The title cut has some expressive sax interjections that suggest a broader palatte. Howlin' Down The Cumberland has an appeal that places it alongside his more immediate songs. Next Thunderbird is an ode to a beloved automobile. Wintertime Blues is jaunty while When My Love Crosses Over has a heartfelt vocal that is classic Hiatt. And so it goes with each track adding to the overall strength of the album. He is undoubtly a master but his distinctive vocals are never going to be that easy to disguise. As a longtime Hiatt fan I can easily recommend this to fellow travellers and to new listeners alike. This is real music delivered in realtime that is proudly old school. Produced by veteran Jim Dickinson at Ardent Studio in Memphis on the new Sonoma system with Dickinson's sons Luther and Cody alongside players like bassist David Hood this is an album that in time will be considered up there with Bring The Family.

#### The Mosquitoes Self-Released

Along with the similarly minded (but different) outfit The Rackateers, this Dublin band produce a sound that is equal parts roots rock, rockabilly, and rough-edged rockin' blues. It makes no pretense to be anything other than the unrestrained celebration of classic rock' n' roll-isms that it is (summed up on a track like *Cars*, *Girls* and *Drinkin*') and it is all the more enjoyable for that. Not that they haven't considered the recording process here, they have, adding such touches as horns, accordion, organ and theremin into the mix, alongside some quest backing vocalists

to create an album that works on more than one level. The sandpaper vocals on *Voodoo Doll* may doing nothing new but they deliver it with a mood and method that it as believable as anything coming from more distant shores. Produced by the band themselves they can be rightly proud of a powerful and entertaining debut.

#### Cousin Elias Montpelier Hill Triplehorn

A neatly packaged 4 track ep from a local band that offers some quiet acoustic guitar-based reflective but focused music. This may not be Americana, but may well be appreciated by that genre's audience. A little of Neil Young's more stripped down songs is echoed in *Will My Head* while *Keepin' With The Call* comes across a little like a rough demo for America's A *Horse With No Name*. Where they go from here is the interesting thing. For now though, a fair enough start, www.cousinelias.com

#### Patty Griffin Impossible Dream Proper

An artist who has gained the respect of both fellow artist and of many critics, Patty Griffin has yet to break out of cult status. This new album continues her high standard of writing and performance and producer Craig Ross gives her a symphatectic sound to work with. The cast of players is exelmpory with such stalwarts as Brady Blade, JD Foster, Ian McLagan, Buddy Miller and Lisa Germano as well as producer Ross involved, their skills never overwhelm the songs. There are soulful songs like Standing, the chilling Cold As It Gets, as well as the longing expressed in her own version of Top Of The World, recorded by the Dixie Chicks. Holding it all together is Griffin's powerful and emotive voice which can be tender and tough by turns but always given the songs their focus point. Mid-way through the album her parents can be heard singing their version of the standard, and the album's title, Impossible Dream. This adds a poigency to the album that is mirrored by the muisc that surround it. More singer-songwriter than roots it is never-the-less an album that will enhance her already strong, reputation.

#### Chris Hillman The Other Side Cooking Vinyl

His place in the in the history of country-roots rock and bluegrass is assured, as any one of the many bands he has been pivotal to would attest. He gently underlines that with his acoustic re-run of on of the Byrds' highlights *Eight Miles High* that opens this latest solo album. He also then revisits *True Love*, the title of one of his Desert Rose band albums. From then on he delivers a bunch of songs written with long-term writing partner Steve Hill that cleary show his love and return to the acoustic bluegrass-

based music that he first started out playing, and has been playing for a number of years now, often with his friend Herb Pedersen. With exquisite harmonies and inventive playing Hillman appears to be where he wants to be at this time in his decades long career, and while he may never achieve the legendry status of his former partner Gram Parsons, it is Hillman who is still with us making music that is full of life energy and positivity.

#### Bruce Springsteen Devils and Dust Columbia

Periodically Bruce Springsteen pares down his music to a simpler folkier core, he did this with the harsh Nebraska, released in 1982, and he returns to that mode again here and though it never reaches the bare-knuckles intensity of Nebraska it has some raw edges. Especially in the accompanying DVD footage where some of the tracks are delivered in a basic guitar and voice setting. Here, as on All The Way Home and most of the other tracks, there are full band arrangements even with pedal steel and brass, on occasions. After The Rising his response to 9/11, the politics are this time turned more inwards. The title song finds a unnamed soilder in an unamed war feeling a profound loss of faith. Springsteen still has the ability to set a scene to bring you to a place and to tell a story. Call it folk, call it rock, call it roots but don't call it wrong. Springsteen is a master songwriter and this is one of his best albums. For me, I love the boxing story of The Hitter, a song which is akin to a good screenplay and with a great sountrack.

#### Chip Taylor and Carrie Rodroguez Train Wreck

For their third album this duo, who have settled into a perfect pairing, recorded in New York and enlisted innovative guitarist Bill Frisell to work with them on what was, essentialy, a live in the studio sceanario. As well as tracking Chip's fine songs, they recorded two Hank Williams songs and an old fiddle tune. Though some of Chip's songs like Keep Your Hat On Jenny, have an age old quality to them, others are very much the kind of slightly different lyrical approach that I associted with him like Big Moon Shinin'. As well as the aforementioned trio, Jim Whitney played bass and Kenney Wollesen was the drummer. The unit is both innovative and understated allowing the vocals plenty of space and filling in at all the right places with Frisell again added his unique touches. Rodriguez has become a so-right foil for Chip's limited vocal range, both voices comfortably blend into a more perfect whole. This third duo album is a more laid-back affair than the previous releases but offers the listener a back-porch space with which to get acquainted with their abundant charms.

#### Various Artists Essential Americana Spit and Polish

One has to applaud the endevours of Francis MacDonald, firstly in starting his Shoeshine label, of which Spit and Polish is a division, but, also, in getting behind the music that he so obviously loves. Now a member of Teenage Fanclub he divides his time with that and with running his labels, to keep the analogy, a shoestring budget. He has brought to the attention of a perceptive audience the talents of Laura Cantrell, Paul Burch, Amy Rigby, Jason Ringenberg, Steve Young, Tim Carroll, Tom Armstrong, John Miller and others. Granted some he has licenced from other labels and some already had growing reputations prior to involving themselves with the label, but many would have found it a lot more difficult to get distribution without the association. This compilation, which also features two tracks not taken from existing albums (Laura Cantrell and Paul Burch), is a testement to his taste in interesting roots music of all hues and the 16 tracks mark a pretty good place for entering the fray. There are a number of personal favourites here, not least Cantrell, Ringenberg and Burch, but you will find your own gems - get polishing.

#### Danny George Wilson The Famous Mad Mile Fargo

Singer with UK's Grand Drive delivers a solo album on fine French label. No info on this one other that what's on the sleeve, which says that it was recorded in Simon's front room over four Saturdays in June and July 2003. But that says a lot really. There are softly plucked banjos, acoustic guitars, simple lap steel and soothing cello over Wilson's rough hewn-voice and that's accompanied by some balanced female harmony vocals. The Simon is producer Simon Alpin who has given the songs a warm and lightly textured sound that is like a relaxing in a comfortable lived in living-room. This is summed up well on a track Like Baby, I'm On Your Side, that plays like a reassuring word of comfort whispered in one's ear. Lovingly hand made, like it's promo sleeve, The Famous Mad Mile will doubtless be one well-travelled once found.

#### John Prine Fair & Square Oh Boy

Like an old friend returning it's good to catch up with Mr Prine, though in truth it doesn't seems that long since he left. The songs are as warm and human as ever, even if he takes a uncharacteristic direct side-swipe at ol' George W in the aptly titled *Some Humans Aint' Human*. Overall he makes his usual nonjudgemental observations on the indiosyncrasities of ordinary people and their lives. Produced by Prine and Gary Paczosa it has the kind of organic sound that feels like it just grew naturally

from the songs. Old hands Jason Wiber and David Jacques are again on hand, as are guests like Mindy Smith, Jerry Douglas, Alison Krauss and Dan Tyminski - amongst others. The songs written over the last few years since he recovered from throat cancer take stock of life, love and loss. He also covers *Clay Pigeons* written by murdered singer Blaze Foley and *Bear Creek Blues*, credited to A P Carter. These songs hit you fair and square in the heart and remind that a old friend is back and what a pleasure that is.

#### Grey DeLisle Iron Flowers Sugar Hill

Quite what I expected from the opening track, a cover of the Queen classic Bohemian Rhapsody, I'm sure that DeLisle didn't want to repeat the sound of her previous album, the civil war centered, The Graceful Ghost. On all counts fears are negated. This is well up to DeLisle's inventive best, with a more robust sound. DeLisle's distinctive voice sits atop a full band sound that credits, this time out, such items as Les Paul lead guitar. Elvis snare drum and industrial pedal steel. Players include Greg Leisz, Don Heffington, Marvin Etzioni as well as ex-Fairport drummer Dave Mattacks. Former Lone Justice player Etzioni produced the album with an inventive and incisive touch. There are moments of lightness, like the first half of The Blood Bucket, or the sorrow inherent in Sweet Little Bluebird, an acoustic song that skillfully uses an excerpt from a negro prison song Cold Iron Shackles or a song like the brooding Inside Texas that utulises two drummers and two bass players. They contrast with the dynamic sound on her cover of Rev. Charlie Jackson's God Got It. DeLisle, aside from the vocal prowess she displays has become a fine songwriter who can draw some alluring images that seem to be coming from a different time and space. All of which makes Iron Flowers a compelling album and DeLisle a recommended artist.

#### Ryan Adams & The Cardinals Cold Roses Lost Highway

A new double album that finds Adams closer in spirit to the full band setting of Whiskeytown than on his more recent albums. But then it's not quite a simple as that as the sound of this album, produced Tom Schick, is not that of his former band. There is the reported fascination with the work of the Grateful Dead that is apparent here not just in some of the sonic touches but also, to a degree in the typography of the advertising and in the artwork. Again, as with a lot of double albums, many will say it would have made a great single set. As I might have, until I listened to it some more and began to get it its diversity a lot more. Plus it has one very immediate song,

the single Let It Ride that I played over and over. Also full credit to Adams for crediting all the songs here to the full band. And it is a great band, worth having for the pleasure of hearing former Asleep At The Wheel alumni Cindy Cashdollar in a broader setting than you would normally hear her. Cold Roses undoubtably has its thorns but it also has it's share of (American) beauty over its 19 song, and maybe a quick nod to the New York Dolls on Beautiful Sorta, or maybe that's just me.

#### Lucinda Williams Live at the Fillmore Lost Highway

Another double album from Lost Highway, this one has been the subject of some speculation and delay. Basically reviews have either said that this is Williams raw and live, while others have said it sounds like it has been subjected to a lot of post-production perfecting. The truth probably lies in the middle. The other factor is that as it is a record of a tour that was promoting the then current album release at the end of 2003 the opportunity to include more of her earlier material was missed. The bottom line is however that this is a an album that all of her fansbase will enjoy and it highlights her excellent band. She does however sound a little restrained, in that having seen her play live several times, she can be more communicative than she is here. Neverthe-less the 22 songs on offer are prime Williams and a good enough reason to show why she is, deservedly, so respected for her music, both her audience and her fellow musicians.

#### Laura Cantrell Humming by The Flowered Vine Matador

From the opening track on this JD Foster-produced album it's apparent that Laura has moved on. The sound is fuller, more focused than before, which some may lament, but which, for the artis, is a neccessary progression. Her voice is more produced than previously and therefore has a clearer dynamic. The songs are a mix of her own (with one co-write) and well chosen covers such as Letters which is a Lucinda Williams song, or And Still is written by Dave Schramm(who also plays on it). There is a much broader palate of instruments being utulised here, a lot more keyboards than previously which have given the whole album a richer, more colourful sound, one that should bring Laura's fans along with her, they only have to hear her version of Wynn Stewart's Wishful Thinking to come along for the ride. From then on they will enjoy the new landscape. Her arrangement of the traditional Poor Ellen Smith also makes direct links with her previously recorded work but it is the future that holds most promise and potential for rich pickings from the vine.

#### Buried Beds Po Tolo Self-Released

This self-released 5 track ep, which comes in a solid plain brown cardboard sleeve features the vocal talents of Eliza Hardy and Brandon Beaver, who wrote all the songs here which are languid and leisurely and utulise violin, viola and cello to create the slightly somber mood which is then peppered with piano, mandolin, guitar and banjo and a layer of lap steel. The end result is interesting rather than definitive and points to perhaps more varied tempos and moods the next time out. Buried Beds do, however, have a sound that is likeable and lonely.

#### The Mountain Goats The Sunset Tree 4AD

The always interesting Mountain Goats, whose constitute John Darnielle and friends, have released a compelling body of work of which this is the latest and perhaps best. Full of yearning and loss it features Darnielle's often almost spoken voice, acoustic guitar and thoughtful songs interlaced with cello, keyboards and percussion. Those songs range from the lament of *Song for Dennis Brown*, a eulogy for the late reggae singer or *Love Love Love*, which mentions Kurt Cobain in passing. In amongst the catalogue of human frailty there is a sense of the positive. Underscored by the sleeves exhortation to "Never Lose Hope". The Mountain Goats know the path that takes them to the top, they are sure footed and instinctive. *The Sunset Tree* grows tall and strong.

#### Terry Allen The Silent Majority Sugar Hill

An all round creatively energised artist for whom music is just one outlet, but one he does so well, and his other albums confirm. Since signing with Sugar Hill they have been steadily rereleasing his back catalogue and this album subtitled Terry Allen's Greatest Missed Hits is a gathering of tracks that missed previous albums, for one reason or another, or appeared in films or plays. They range from solo performances to full band ones to recordings done in India with a group of Indian musicians. His long time friend Lloyd Maines, who writes the booklet intro has also been involved in many of these recordings in one form or another. Allen is an entertaining songwriter and singer, who has been described as a country Randy Newman, and he is certainly as individual as Newman. There are some wonderful songs of his here, like I Love Germany or Arizona Spiritual as well as a version of Home On The Range. Those in the know will know others can get this and began a lifelong friendship.

# Billy Don Burns Heroes, Friends and Other Troubled Souls Indie Mafia

Mr Burns has been round the block a time or two and has worked with some of the best in the business which makes this a real if ragged album. These songs tell the tales. From the autographical *I Was There* to his obviously heartfelt, but regretful, tribute Haggard and Hank. Other songs touch on the darker side like *Dark Side Of The Spoon* a harrowing addiction song. Burns has written or co-written all these song and also co-produced. The fine cast of players include Hayseed Dixies' Don Wayne and Dale Reno and on *Patsy* Willie Nelson adds his distinctive acoustic lead guitar while his friend Tanya Tucker joins him on the opening *Mississippi*. If you want to hear songs full of life (and death and all points in between) delivered in a somewhat world-weary but ultimayely uplifting voice from one of the original outlaws then this is for you. A reminder that country and roots music hasn't had all it's rough edges knocked off.

# Darrell Scott, Danny Thompson and Kenny Malone Live in NC Full Light

Somewhat blindly I had pegged Darrel Scott as a bluegrass player, but his last album and this current live collection show him in a much wider light. This excellent trio deliver an a riveting live album that covers many bases and a wide range of styles. Moving between acoustic and electric guitars and providing strong vocals Scott may be the focal point but with players of the calibre of his companions it could never be a oneman show. The songs, mostly written by Scott, include his *River Take Me*, about the desperate plight of a hard-pressed working man, mixed with the bluesy *It's The Whiskey That Eases The Pain* by Wayne Scott and a wonderful version of Johhny Cash's *I Still Miss Someone*. Then there's his moving song *You'll Never Leave Harlan Alive* next to extended workouts on *Folsom Prison/White Freightliner Blues*. Soul and skill together, what more could you ask?

# North Mississippi Allstars Hill Country Revue Cooking Vinvl

A full on rhythmic soulful rockin'blues live set from the Allstars and guests. Jim Dickson joins his sons Luther and Cody as well as the Burnsides, including RL on vocals, and Rising Star Fife and Drumb Band. Recorded at the Bonnaroo Festival last year to the obvious enjoyment of the band and audience, the Allstars fans will not need any encouragement to give it an ear

and its infectious spirit will draw in others who like the extended riffs and workouts that are part and parcel of such live albums.

#### Lori McKenna The Kitchen Tapes Rounder

As the title says there song were recorded in McKenna's kitchen with just voice and guitar. Stark and stripped down they rely on Mckenna forceful voice and fingrerpicking. Recored as one-take demos they have that fresh, raw quality that some people favour over the more produced and arranged studio versions. McKenna's song are worth listening to, but I suspect this album will be of most interest to those who know here work and or have seen her live.

#### M Ward Transistor Radio Matador

Well M's back with a new album and it continues his exploration of his muse with a whole bunch of songs that often seen to be somewhat unfocussed but taken as a whole offer an enjoyable listening experience. Certain individual songs, such as *Fuel For Fire*, make a more immediate impact. The songs are mostly built around Ward's acoustic guitar and full voice with a variety of instruments adding colour, from pedal steel to piano. Then there are also tracks like *Regeneration No 1* where the drums are let loose and the guitar twangs on what approximates a surf-ish instrumental. In other words M Ward covers a lot of ground on *Transistor Radio*. Check the dial, you'll find something you like.

#### Niall Toner Band Mood Swing Self-Released

Niall has been a part of the roots scene since way-back-when and has delivered some excellent music along the way, as well as playing some when working in radio. Here his Niall Toner Band, the trio of Niall, Clem O'Brien and Dick Gladney once again deliver the goods. The playing is top notch throughout and, while rooted in bluegrass, the songs written by Niall, for the most part, either solo or with a selection of partners cover a wider range of styles. Many would suit a more full country sound as much as the acoustic setting they are given here. Niall has developed into a fine writer as well as singer and player. This is the difficult second album and it has been well worth the struggle there may have been in its creation. Niall's track notes are illuminating making it one of the best home grown packages in some time, but one that will easily hold its own with outside company too.

#### Jessie De Natale Shangri-La West Jackpine

One of the hits of the recent Killenny Rhythm and Roots weekend, De Natale performed several shows delivering his literate songs in a voice that is part Tom Waits, part Willy De Ville and part mid-period Van. Here he is accompanied by a tight four-piece band who add bass, drums, keyboards and guitars to his sound. De Natale songs work both in their basic state and in this, still laid back, but more accomplished setting. His songs can draw you in like with their wordiness listen to *Angel Baby, Bohemian Ghosts* and especially to the title track. Sharp, subtle and sensual *Shangri-La West* deserves a visit.

#### Ol' Yeller Sounder SMA

Minneapolis based band deliver some straight up hard edged rock that has roots touches. Singer and guitarist Rich Mattson is the songwriter here and his songs of interpersonal relationships fit into the growling context of their guitar-orientated sound. Slower songs like *Blue Marvel* have a stronger melodic base while a song like *Afterbar* tend to recall Neil Young's Crazy Horse days. Ol' Yeller, in truth, may not be that different from any number of similiarly influenced bands but they deliver their music with an admirable drive and doubtless are a great live band and local attraction.

#### Mattias Hellberg Mattias Hellberg Fargo

Recorded in 2003 but picked up by Fargo this Swedish song-writer, who writes and sings in English, and his four piece band deliver some rootsish orientated songs that sound great. Walking Restless has a melodic sense that makes it an immediate favourite with this writer. Hellberg has an agreeable voice with just enough grit in it to make it right. They run from the energy of True to quieter moments like the depressive Power Failure. Not strictly alt. country it none-the-less has an overall feel that would not make it out of sorts with that description. The album is full of songs that make you want to play the album over again and make you realise that the music here is a notch above many a more hyped album that you could mention. The album closes with its only outside song a simple, but effective, meloncholy version of Paul Simon's Mother and Child Reunion.

#### Chris Cook Small Town Gone Gaff Music

A very pleasent surprise, Chris Cook supported Kevin Montgomery on his last visit here and this album has a more country feel that his solo set led me to think. Cook is an accomplished singer, writer and guitar player who songs deal with, as the title suggests, the plight of small towns in decline as well as with relationships and a sense of time and place in songs like *Old Suede Coat* and *Old Guitar*. The songs are full of pedal steel, violin and dobro, all adding nice textures to his personal take on the music he grew up listening to. But he also heard rock and a lot of other genres that also play a part here. Any one who likes their country to be a little outside of the overly polised mainstream variety should enjoy this collection of memorable, well delivered songs.

#### Greg Trooper Make It Through This World Sugar Hill

Hailed in some quarters as his finest work to date, there is no doubting the majesty of this album, produced by Dann Penn. It has a more soulful feel than his previous albums. But I don't want to detract from his previous work, some of which is the equal of this album. Rather it is a successful change of direction that has highlighted an aspect of Greg's always expressive voice. As always the songs are good insights in the human condition and shot through with a sense of decency that Trooper embodies. The players include Bill Kirchen on guitars, Steve Fishell on steel and dobro, Kevin Blevins on drums, David Jacques on bass and (importantly in this setting) Kevin McKendree on a host of keyboards, including the ubiquitous Hammond B3. Hopefully the praise for this album will bring Trooper's career recognition to another level.

#### Signal Hill Transmission Tomorrow The Stars P.A. Juice

Another album that skirts the Americana fringes. The Signal Hill boys make indie rock sounds that can be as in your face as *Hard Luck Story*, as compelling as the title track or a sensitive as *Lonely People* for instance, though most have a hard-edged moment or two to keep you on your toes. They have used the standard band instrumentation to good advantage to give the songs an quick twist or kick as well as having some sweeter, hookier sections. *Love Is Dead* manages to be both sweet and sour and express it sentiment with a compelling directness. *Frail* opens with a delicateness, that finds it at its most rootsier, if that is even the right word, rather perhaps, and again in keeping with the title, its a quieter, more reflective moment. This will appeal to those whose listening habits normal head to the crossover point between Americana and Indie rock or who have stuck with Wilco through that process.

#### Frog Holler The High, Highs and the Low Lows Zo Bird

A new ep from the Pensillvania band, who are rootiser in approach than the previous two acts but who are hardly hard country. The jaunty Sleepy Eyes is a good example of the blend, whereas Off Course Walking crosses over and mixes the banjo with some harder rock sounds. This seven track extended play has a couple of good songs, the rootsier style of Ask Him Why makes it a stand-out and is balanced by the guitar led closer Million Things Good. The EP suggests that they have more in store and are a good live band rather than having just made a great recording.

#### Shearwater Thieves Fargo

Another EP, this time from the athmospheric Shearwater. This is understated quietly focused music, that at times seems barely there but has a definite impact with its whisper rather than a scream approach. The upfront banjo on Mountain Laurel is most effective and it remains strong as the drums and guitar make themselves known, in what is, on this ep, by comparrison almost a rock song. There's A Mark Where You Were Breathing is brought back to just voice and guitar and is very effective in its virtual ambient state. The closing cut Near A Garden uses more instrumentation but still remains locked into the quiet zone. Shearwater make very interesting and rewarding records that are beloved by many a Americana commentator, and deservedly so.

#### Great Lake Swimmers Bodies And Minds Fargo

This would sit nicely alongside label-mates Shearwater above, more quiet but effective music that sets up a mood and tone that runs throughout the album's eleven tracks which use acoustic guitars, understated vocals and percussion effectively. Particularly on a lovely song like Various Stages. The Americana element is provided by the lap steel and banjo among the instrumentation. It is the kind of album that works best in its entirity, not as individual highlights. The Great Lake Swimmers are well worth getting acquainted with.

#### Ben Weaver Blues Living Hollerin' Fargo

Another new release from the French Americana specialists. This gathers together some earlier releases but these pre-releases come with little info so the details are unavailable. However it lives up to its title with Weaver's voice covering all three on a track like *Precious Time*. The music has a complementary rough edge.

#### Mack Starks Blind Spot No Label

A new name to me Starks writes introspective songs that might find favour with fans of Wilco's more recent output. Many of the songs are written with producer Neilson Hubbard who is also part of the tightly knit band who, with some guests, have created a robust enough setting for Starks downbeat

voice. Listening again I'm also reminded a little of our own Nick Kelly's last album. When the sound gets guieter as on Sleepy Eve it draws you into the heart of the music. Loose Balloon is another observational song that looks closely at a questionable relationship from the inside. David Knopfler co-wrote the song America and again it is an inward looking songs that also views that in the context of the sadness of that country and its own problems. The final song is the album's only cover with his take on Neil Young's Depression Blues. Maybe that song is something of a statement of an overall world view yet it, like the rest of the album is delivered with a conviction that is positive, as the song says "things ain't that bad". Neither is this album, far from it, though it may not be considered country or even roots music its sits on the fringes of a wider template that is wide open in such respects. Blind Spot is a no risk disc from Miles of Music.

#### Erin McKeown We Will Become Like Birds EMI

Another person creating her own space out there on the fringes is Erin McKeown whose latest album takes a more cohesive direction, sound wise, that the more eclectic choices of her previous albums. Produced with Tucker Martine it still has McKeown distinctive approach to her songs but the music here is harder with guitars and drums providing the music's backbone. In a way this album will, likely connect with an audience quicker because of that and those who have caught her shows live here before will easily connect with this. Again there is little here that makes any connection with the roots associations that the previous albums just about touched upon. Songs like We Are More have an immediate catchiness that may bring her to a wider audience. Her duet with Peter Mulvey on Delicate December has a tenderness that is understated but effective. A compelling performer both on record and live McKeown is not for everyone but those who get it will love it and will fly right up there with her.

#### Wayne Scott This Weary Way Full Light Records

Now this couldn't be anything else but country. Wayne Scott is father to Darrell Scott and is now at 70 years plus making his debut which came about when he presented his son with a bunch of songs he'd written over the last few decades. He always loved and played music but never had the opportunity to record them or even play them live. So here's a bunch that show what an undiscovered talent he is. His voice is full of age and wisdom and perfectly in tune with that of Guy Clark who duets with him on the open song It's The Whiskey That Eases The

Pain. The playing throughout is superb with son Darrell bring is some fine friends to deliver the goods. There are a couple of outside tracks that show off Wayne's full of life voice. Dorsey Dixon's Crash On The Highway and a live version of Folsom Prison Blues where he quests with his son. Anyone with a love of good singer/songwriter straight ahead country music will love this little unassuming album. Thye highlight are the song co-written with Darrell I Wouldn't Live In Harlan Country. When It's Raining After Midnight is a blues styled song that runs parallel to Walkin' After Midnight. There is also a heartfelt gospel song in Since Jesus Came Into My Heart. This Weary Way is simple tonic and can be got through www.fulllightrecords.com

#### T. Griffin Coraline The Sea Won't Take Long

Shiny Little Records

This is an album full of athmospheric sounds and imaginative lyrics. There are looped rhythms and stray sounds surrounding the guitars, banjo, trumpet, keyboards and strings. They add depth to the overall effect that Coraline's music is straight forward on one level but strangely strange on another. The overall effect is one that draws you in and repeated listening only enhances the enjoyment of this lowkey album. The buffalo on the cover suggest a free spirit, while the inner images of New York suggest a slightly different landscape and mind set. Just listen to Nellie Bly, wherein Coraline duets with partner Catherine McRae over a slighlty distoretd guitar figure that mirrors the abstracted lyric. Or the banjo that underpins Aeroplane, a song that ask " what you gonna when Jesus flys by in his aeroplane?". The voices, instruments and machines create a attractive, curious, monochromatic, if other worldly place to wander but remember the sea won't take long but it's still worth getting wet for. www.shinylittlerecords.com

#### Michael Ubaldini Avenue Of The Ten Cent Hearts No Label

A big sounding record that features horns, piano and B3 organ over the guitars, bass and drum setting. The title track comes over in a Springsteen vein, in contast to the swing style of the opening song I'm A Sucker 4 You. Ubaldoni is credited with lyrics, music, arrangements and production, it touches a lot of bases that can be placed under the roots umbrella. He has a strong voice and delivers the songs strongly. This may not be a particularly original album but it is one that has purpose and pride. The songs come from experience, as in the self-explanatory (Lifetime of) Bar Band Blues, or from reflection in Old Time Radio or from the school of hard knocks in Hard Luck Town. The pedal steel adds a touch of country mood to The Words You Speak. A solid and dependable album that many will enjoy if you take the album in its context.

#### The Bastard Sons Of Johnny Cash Mile Markers Texacali

This album is wonderful. Main bastard Mark Stuart (not Stacy Earle's partner) has written all the songs here and delivers the strong and soulful vocals. He has surround himself with a crack team of California players who include Dwight/Lucinda's rhythm section of Taras Prodaniuk and Jim Christie as well as Greg Leisz on pedal steel and more, and co-producer Mark Turner (with Stuart and Alan Mirikitani) on guitars. The opening tracks Austin Night and The Road To Bakersfield are as strong an intro as you could wish for and there's not a dud over the remaining ten cuts. Of which the Lonely Tonight has a poingent grace, in a tale of lost souls. While the similarly midpaced ballad Under You Spell has some fine thoughtful guitar. Mile Markers is one of those albums that is unmistakenly rooted in traditional country but one with very contemporary edge, and it is decidedly not a bland Nashville Music Row one. www.bsojc.com

#### Rick Shea Bound For Trouble Tres Pescadores

This album from Rick Shea and The Losin' End was originally released in 2000 as *Sawbones*. This fine album has now been re-released with three extra tracks including his take on Nick Lowe's *Never Been In Love*, a duet with Christy Mc Wilson. The original album was a prime example of Shea's understanding and expertise in roots music forms from blues, bluegrass and country all delivered in his rich baritone voice. If you missed it last time out then here's a second chance. www.trespescadores.com

All reviews by Stephen Rapid

#### **CREDITS AND THANK YOUS**

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This issue was written by Steve Rapid and edited by Sandy Harsch (as was the last issue).

With thanks to Paul McGee who interviewed Blue Rodeo. Original photography by Ronnie Norton.

Contact us at: Studio 2, 30 East Essex Street, Temple Bar, Dublin 2, Ireland Cover image is Jason Ringenberg on stage, or rather on the tables in Whelans. The Inset is Jessica Havey fron the Duhks.

Last issues cover star, for those who didn't work it out, was Dave Alvin in action in Kilkenny





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ALL PHOTOGRAPHY BY RONNIE NORTON





# hayseed dixie "the similarity between the faster metal stuff and bluegrass means we have been able to appeal to a lot of the hardrock people"

The regular visits that Hayseed Dixie have made to Europe attest to their popularity as a live act. They appeal to a wide-ranging audience ranging from metal heads to bluegrass pickers and with such talent players as Don and Dale Reno, steeped in the bluegrass tradition, one should expect no less. Then there's guitarist, singer and writer John Wheeler, the man who heads up Hayseed Dixie with humour, skill and verve. He took us through the band's basic story on the street outside Whelans with barely a stop for breath. Though this interview was done awhile back we feel it still has interest.

Essentially the inspiration behind Hayseed Dixie was corn liquor. That's not some kind of stage shtick, that's the truth. We all got together to drink some corn liquor, there was Don and Dale (Reno) and Mile Daly who used to play dobro with us. It wasn't really a band they were just guys I'd met playing in studios. We got together when everyone's wives were out of town and we thought we'd drink a little. We never intended to do anything else but we got to playing AC/DC songs, which I think was my fault as I've been doing that since I was in college. Mixing country and heavy rock stuff together. We were sufficiently into the liquor and beer to say "hey let's go in a roll some tape on this thing". We did the record more or less in one day. I went back in to overdub some fiddle and vocals then we mixed it the next day and burned about 20 copies and passed them around friends. Then it got passed around Nashville, even onto Music Row. Then it got released but I never expected that it would devour our lives, like it has, made a career or anything. Not that I'm upset about that. It's been an awful lot of fun and we're getting to carry a torch for the dark side of bluegrass, which is, in fact, a very big side of it. There's the murder ballads and Celtic tradition that goes way way back, and that is where we get some of our stuff anyway.

The last album wasn't really a compilation as we cut new stuff for it. There's five new songs - the Darkness tune, Ace of Spades and a couple of new AC/DC songs that weren't on the US release. Because nobody over there knew A Whole Lot Of Rosie. There's an original tune called Corn Liquor that I wrote about my Dad, he was a hog farming moonshiner like his dad

before him and my cousins all grow pot because that's more lucrative. The funny thing is though the sheriff that my grandad was paying off they are now paying off his grandkids, who are now in the sheriff's department. It's sort of an established order. That Copperhead road thing, and that's a great song, and there are other songs like it that's pretty much the truth, well it is up in those hollers anyhow.

As regards the future I don't know. If I can make it to London tomorrow, then I'm going to be wondering how we are going to get to the next date. That's the way it's been for the last four years - nobody here's got a plan. I would love to tell you that there is this big master plan and I'm this badass who made it come together. But no, nothing like that, but I will say the one thing that I've learned from this project, and I've learned a few things, is that if you get your head out of your ass and just do stuff that you like it often turns out that other people will have fun listening to it too.

I got nothing against people who want to spend all day writing songs that confess their deep poetic nature but I think to do that you have first got to have a really interesting soul. You need to be Bob Dylan or somebody. And I don't know if I have one of those. But if you make a record that you think would be fun to listen to rather than trying to create a piece of art from scratch, well that might work better. In three hundred years from now someone else is going to decide what was art. But I'm going to be dead so I won't care. I don't think when the Magic Flute was written it was to create a masterwork. I think it was probably about trying to pay the bills and feed the kids. But it just so happen that a lot of other people smiled when they heard it so it's art. I don't have a very Marxist view of art anyhow, let's put it that way.

Dale and Don, who play mandolin and banjo, their dad was Don Reno, they have been playing their entire lives, and I have as well, and I recorded a lot of things that were not commercial. I also played fiddle sessions for other people but I'm thirty

Friday and Saturday nights. Then I taught a couple of freshman classes on logic, bring a television set in and ask them what the premise and argument behind it was. Are they true, are the valid, are they sound? Had a ball doing that.

The new album, called a Hot Piece Of Grass, (out now) is split down the middle - it's half original and half other people's Springsteen and there were these diatribes about having to get the Bush administration out, but I don't come here to represent anybody's government, the United States or anyone's. I'm a citizen of the world and I'm a musician and I think we all make way too much of where we come from. That's how you end up with a Nazi Germany and shit like that. If we get over that and realise that we have a handful of people who own everything and that our governments are just business agents for these people. We are there to create their wealth and that's what the problem is, it's not to do with any particular person. I don't want to stand on a soapbox to say "arise my people". I mean I respect the hell out of a guy like Jello Biafra and he has, I guess, a lot more self confidence than I do. When I was twenty I could have told you who the bullets should be aimed at and what window the brick should go through, but I can't anymore.

The reason why the first three records were other people's songs was what record companies wanted, I mean we have got about 65 tunes recorded, as we sit around and drink and write when we are on the road and we go and record them right then. We play a fair bit of that in our live shows, we don't just play 10 AC/DC songs and then say thank you goodnight, we do traditional songs too but it depends on what angle is being spun to get people interested. Hopefully we are also turning a lot of people onto the potential of the banjo and mandolin. We've had punk rock kids coming in, with their mohawks, and up till then they didn't even know what a mandolin was. So then maybe one of them will go do something with it that would never occur to us. So, in the end, we are passing it all along.

Of other bands around doing something similar I like the Bad Livers a bunch. The O Brother movie may have made radio in the States a little more open to playing our stuff but there is still the stereotype associated with the music, the kid in Deliverance thing, and by the way Don and Dale's Dad co-wrote that song, but in the end it has been a pretty lived thing. Like there was a swing fad a while back. There was a brief spurt when everyone got into it but beyond that soundtrack it didn't really make a lot of difference that I can see.

As for the darker side of bluegrass most of the bands, like Ricky Scraggs, who are great by the way, do the church side of the stuff. That is a very big part of the tradition but there is the other side that descends from the celtic tradition that we brought with us when we came over to America. Being over here I have been able to see where my surname comes from and I think my ancestors name was probably Whelan before we moved to America. The people on my Dad's side where pretty we got it off the ground.

four now and I've been playing since I was twenty seven, after I got a doctorate in philosophy. I guess I could write about much all Irish, my father's name was Donal, and there has to be a reason they named him that. My Granddaddy didn't even why Schopenhauer would think I should get drunk and kick ass, because he would think that, well maybe, it would depend know how to write. He'd sign his name with an X. My Mom's maiden name was Garrett and I met a guy here who said his on whose interpretation that you wanted to go with, and they're all so vague, man. I made a little beer money playing on name was Garrett and he had a nose just like mine. All I'm saying though was that the people who settled those areas in the mountains where we came from were mostly Scots/irish, with a little Dutch, German and some English. I think that bluegrass music, and it's called that because Bill Monroe called his band that name, and I think that that music is a direct descendent of that celtic and English music folk traditions. It kind of evolved up there in isolation.

songs and they are the ones that we've picked we felt were "sign of the times" songs. War Pigs, stuff like that. I'm not really The similarity between the faster metal stuff and bluegrass means we have been able to appeal to a lot of the hardrock people. an inherently political guy, if the government leaves me alone well then I'm cool to leave then alone. I don't want the respon- In the States we have been doing this for about four years so most people coming to our shows know what to expect. But sibility of having to "lead my people". On the way over here they were playing a lot of people like Kris Kristofferson, who I over here its been like the first year in the States with a lot of people taken aback and standing on their jaw. We didn't know really like, Tom Waits and Patti Smith and Michael Stipe (who made some good records several years ago) plus Bruce on the first few shows wether they were hating us or what, but by the end of the show they were hanging off the rafters. We were watching them get turned on to it, once they got used to it they realised that we can really play. It was like it was a joke which the would get after the or four songs and then they'd leave but they didn't they loved it. We've also played metal gigs with a lot of heavy bands. In the States we toured with Jackal, a Motorhead-ish kind of band, for whatever reason those guys decided that they loved having us open for them. They're from Atlanta so they're sorts Southern guys in a metal kind of way. The singer uses a chain saw and cuts stuff up on stage. He's got a mike on it so he plays a solo on it on one song. Hank 111 in my opinion is great, he's one of the great under achievers right now. I wish he'd do his thing without hanging around with these Pantera guys but as long as he's having fun that's what matters.

> On the other side I don't know what the conservative bluegrass fraternity think of us as I don't really run into too many of them. We don't play any of their festivals, put it that way. But we've sold damn nearly a quarter of a million records which other than Alison Krauss and Del McCoury, and actually we've sold more records than Del has. And it's not like they give us any awards or even mentions, which doesn't affect me in any way but it bugs Don and Dale. They're great players and should be recognised and I'd like to see them get recognition.

> There's also the Keresone Brothers, our alter ego, where we went in the other direction with a drummer and I used a Les Paul and we did half standards and half I written in a real rock way but with the mandolin still prominent. Koch put that out put they marketed it as a straight country album and that didn't work. It sold a few thousand but not enough to continue down that road with. It fell into the gap between country, too much nasty guitar, and rock radio said that's a banjo. But we did have a lot of fun opening for ourselves for a year. We should tour with Steve Earle, actually his manager's the reason we have a record deal over here as he set me up with the guys at Cooking Vinyl. A guy was doing an AC/DC festival in Wrexham in Wales and he wanted us to play it he got us plane tickets and set up a fee and all that. So I though as we had tickets we should do more shows and see about a record deal and most turned us down, said they couldn't see it working over here but then, as I said, we got connected to Cooking Vinyl and they put this album out.

> Don and Dale said we hope Da's not to mad at us doing this but he was a bit of a rebel himself so... we still do some straight bluegrass picking on albums and also producing but this takes up most of our time and we been doing it since day one so

# CHU CK PROPET

# Before joining Green and Red in 1984 what where your

#### primary influences?

Well it wasn't particularly complicated or obscure. The Byrds had a lot of hit records and they played a lot of first position chord and jangled a little bit. I don't remember any of the bands I was in working out the hot math of the Byrds harmonies, a lot of those harmonies were two-part not three-part. They were deceptively simple but sounded complex. There was music in the air then, wether it was Credence Clearwater or the Stones and Neil Young. This was all music that was there to reach out and grab. Maybe some of the bands in the so called Paisley Underground were privy to some record collector type stuff, that dude from the Floyd - Syd Barrett, something like that.

# You were born out there on the West Coast? I was born in California, sandwiched between Orange County and East LA nowheresville.

#### You were with Green and Red till the end, once you'd joined?

Hey, I don't remember the band splitting up. I remember we did some gigs in California for fun and towards the end we'd done some European gigs. We'd actually booked

some gigs around California ourselves and given ourselves the responsibility to get to each gig. The last one may have been in San Francisco, and it was one of our better gigs, but I don't think we ever knew that it was going to be our last gig. I don't think we ever did anything as formal as even breaking up. Dan and I kind of went on permanent strike. It was sorta like a bar that went out of business. People just stopped showing up. I joke about it but I'm sure if some one was to raise enough money we could get back together and if an offer came in in the tens of thousands I'm sure we could maybe make them a record. I still talk to Danny, we're kinda like army buddies, we only remember the good stuff. At least we only talk about the good stuff. He's like a brother to me as much as our relationship was one of mutual disrespect. I still have a lot of feelings for Dan.

# How much has your solo work changed through its course from Brother Aldo to now?

To be honest I was always trying to find new ways to do the same shit. As a song writer I'm

definitely a traditionalist. It's still the challenge of a good verse and a chorus and making it repeat. There are just new ways to cast the movie or, at least, new ways to keep myself entertained.

# On the later records you brought in things like turntables, was that to bring a fresh edge to the recorded material?

Some of it's chance, I did a session in san Francisco that was kinda a blind date. This cat Jason Karmer had but together a group and asked me to play guitar and he brought in the turntable guy. I woke up with a kind of turntable hangover the next morning (laughs), so I said I got to have some more of that shit so I added that to my own sessions and started bring my own records. I enjoyed it so much, I love that what I call "chocolate in your peanut butter collision". That's just one of many things that have captured my interest.

# How do you feel about pretty much being always put under the Americana umbrella?

I think I am Americana. In the strictest definition of American music, compared to European music, American music was never meant to be written down, if you know what I mean.

# Was hardcore country music a factor at any stage?

I suppose, I can't really say that I have any authentic place in that. I heard a lot of country growing up on the radio. My father liked a lot of that kind of music... Charlie Rich, Mac Davis stuff like that. Those guys that made hit records out of Nashville. I had a second cousin who played banjo and he showed me how to play Foggy Mountain Breakdown. And I remember becoming completely addicted to it.

#### Punk?

Yeah, absolutely. I got completely immersed in all that shit. I remember going to see the Scorchers play in 1983 and a couple of months prior I had seen what was a pivotal gig which was Rank and File opening for DOA. DOA were from Canada and a great punk band. That was at the height of the purist punk thing. Chip and Tony, of Rank and File had cred as they had been in the Dils and they came out and started playing the Wabash Cannonball and had the whole place skanking in the pit. I also remember Alejandro that night standing dead still doing that boom chicka boom bass. And I thought now I know exactly what I want to do. They had fucking great songs like Amanda Ruth. The punk spirit of that had a profound effect on me.

#### Did you see yourself as a guitar player and then later as a singer/songwriter?

I just wanted to be in a band. I was watching the Sex Pistols DVD, The Filth and the Fury, with the footage in that of the garbage strikes, that was a powerful piece of work. I was talking to a friend of mine about it and he said that it brought back memories of a time that hard to imagine now, when being in a band was so important. So I didn't have role models as a singer/songwriter. I always had the ability to bring things out of people and to invent, or make up songs. There was nothing pretentious or knowing about being a songwriter then, you know. That kind of preciousness came later.

#### Do you see yourself as a career musician now?

Well I don't think that the world owes me a living or anything and I hope to carry on being able to make records that people will respond to. I'm sure that there are more important things in the world but I have the sickness. Today people may be more inclined to be film makers as the stakes are a little higher. A real simple three chord song that is fresh and I can turn sideways. The process of writing a song and then wrestling it into the ground then turning it into a record, not just recording it, and then being able to take that same song a being able to kick it around on the bandstand in front of people and have everyone be in the moment. When it comes together I can't think of anything more rewarding. It's fucking fun!

#### How about playing solo?

I enjoy that from time to time but then I'm a cranky guy by nature so when I'm playing with the group I hate to split off and play solo gigs. The thing is I talked to Jim Dickenson about this and in the end I realised that playing by myself is not why I got into music. I don't tour solo much, usually it just gets to bring me to places I don't usually get to go to. Like I have never been to Ireland with the band and I'm the economics have something to do with it. So right now I'm just doing a handful of solo gigs to get me to places I haven't visited.

#### Are you happy with the new album?

I don't know, maybe. I think I need to get a little more distance on it but when I finished it not particularly. After that I can stand back far enough and squint so that I start to like 'em. But they're difficult little bastards. I try to love them and sometimes I get halfway there. I don't think there was any less blood on the floor this time. And anyway it's not really for me to say. I'm a superstitious person in some ways and I don't know where the next record is coming from, I really don't. I always have have this low level anxiety... I haven't written a song in months.

#### How do you usually write?

I try every freaking method know to man! And as soon as I find one that seems to work I immediately start to distrust it. I haven't worked out if it gets easier or harder.

Since this interview was done Chuck has got back together with the surviving members of Green and Red to play a select number of gigs in the US and ion 10h January in London as well as a series of solo performances in Europe, none unfortunately in Ireland.