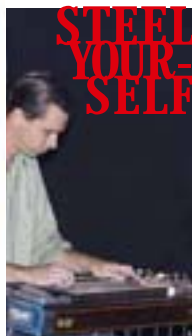


LONESOME HIGHWAY



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SHAKE'EM ON DOWN TH' LEGENDARY SHACK*SHAKERS

and also featuring

HILLBILLY ALLSTARS	CORB LUND
BUDDY MILLER	PATRICIA VONNE
DIERKS BENTLEY	JACE EVERETT
FRED EAGLESMITH	MIKE MCADAM
ALEJANDRO ESCOVEDO	BILLY YEATS





TH' LEGENDARY SHACK*SHAKERS

One of the most exciting roots bands around, both live and on album, Th' Legendary Shack Shakers have played in Ireland at the Kilkenny Rhythm and Roots Weekend, have supported Robert Plant at the Olympia and at the Voodoo Lounge. We took the opportunity speak with lead singer and songwriter colonel J.D Wilkes.

Interview by Steve Rapin and photography by Ronnie Norton

THE BAND LIVE, CLOSE-UP HAS A POWERFUL PRESENCE. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT?
Physical, visceral. A charismatic expression of catharsis. Like the music that got to me which was music that made me move, but not necessarily think. Music that put me into some sort of altered state and from that came revelation. But rather than lyrical revelation it was about rhythm. That was the music of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, even the Pogues. They're people who tap into that thing. With the Pogues or Tom Waits or a lot of these guys who can tap into that rhythm and melody the lyrics are just icing on the cake. I think it's important that music attacks you on a human, guttural level. It then gets under your skin and pulls you in. I think that's the way to go about it rather than just being a place on the dial-tone. Grip them with music than give them the message.

THERE IS A STRONG UNDERCURRENT OF RELIGION IN THE MUSIC TOO...

That comes from my own personal experience. Growing up in different church schools, religion being a big factor in my life, having religious parents. I was brought up between protestant and catholic families. I used to bounce back and forth before winding up in a charismatic church school. During my high school years I wrestled with all of the above, dealing with all those mixed messages. Once those seeds are planted they stay with you and it's hard to shake them. But it's not necessary to shake them off completely. It's important to have a moral underpinning. But then you have all the other baggage that gets thrown in there with it. That ends up haunting you. Flannery O'Connor's Christ-haunted South. I'm interested in those themes as therapy. Writing about those themes in order to get to the heart of the matter, its part of my own personal growth.

YOU HAD AN ARTSCHOOL BACKGROUND, WAS THAT PRIOR TO YOUR MUSICAL EXPLORATION?

Well I was a late bloomer. I didn't get into music or playing until high school. Even though throughout my life I could remember certain musical moments, like when I lived in Louisiana there was a cajun band at an outdoor festival and I went "wow, what is this?". It had taken hold of me. They were a real cajun band with accordians and scrub-board and all that and there was something infectious

in that. There's common elements in different American roots music forms, the folk forms and traditions. It's all born out of a visceral need to get your rocks off, to have a good time and sweat off, to get things out of your system. There are certain bio-rhythmic elements in that music that particularly effects me. I was kinda like Steve Martin when he discovers the blues. While everyone around me was kinda bored with it. I'm like "what's wrong with you people, can't you hear what's going on". That was like my first musical awakening. I was maybe thirteen. Later on there was some things like discovering my Dad's Muddy Waters records. I felt "man I got to be a part of this". It really motivated me as even though I'm a white kid from Kentucky I felt that the best way to commune with it was to channel it and play it even if it came off as totally wrong. It was calling to me. But then I thought it's not very honourable to be a musician, that the band should only be a hobby. My upbringing may me think that musicians were evil. Art, painting seemed to be something of a hermetic lifestyle. It seemed very insular and about your own personal growth. It was a more introspective supposedly. But I thought how am I going to make a living at this? So, in college, that's when I gave both a chance. I had a band and I was pushing that and I was also getting on with my art. I felt that in those four or five years that I covered a lot of ground. Then the music took off before the art did. Art take so much time, especially being in Kentucky, which is not like being in Manhattan or anything. Nashville was just down the road so all the machinery that I needed to put the music in place was there. So it just seemed a lot quicker and more immediate, so I just wanted to get on with it. I thought maybe I can do the art along with the music. And that's kind of what's been happening.

THE HBO SERIES *CARNIVALE* HAS A VISUAL MOOD SIMILAR TO YOUR MUSIC.

Yeah, I was just watching that the other night. It was beautiful. It's too bad that they cancelled it. We would have been a perfect soundtrack for it. I had talked to our publisher about trying to get on it. Any Tim Burton or Davis Lynch movie would work for us too.



TH' LEGENDARY SHACK*SHAKERS





YOUR ART IS PARTLY ROOTED IN THAT ERA OF TENT SHOW BANNERS...

It takes from that Americana tradition, sort of mystical and exotic, arcane and esoteric. All those things that are spiritual and natural, it's tied in with all the American traditions that I love. It's creepy and has a dual purpose of grabbing the eye and firing the imagination. It carries on the tradition of American exploitation, which is interesting in itself. That's before it turned into the nasty thing that it is now. There was an innocence there too. Back then you did a banner that said "man eating chicken" and it turned out to be a man actually eating a chicken drumstick. I love the way that that played on people's nerves. What PT Barnum started has been distorted into this awful American homogenized system of exploitation out of Hollywood and Madison Avenue. What started out as fun and humbug has been turned into a system of destruction.

It's kind of like the excellence of the naive design style that comes from the posters that Hatch Show Print have produced through years in Nashville. The limitation determines the style. We use Hatch Show for our posters. There's a girl there that runs our fanclub who works at Hatch Show and she hand carves for us.

IT'S LIKE SLEEVE ART WHICH IN SOME WAYS IS LIKE PUTTING THE MONA LISA ON A TEA TOWEL. IT BRINGS ART INTO AN EVERYDAY SITUATION.

I never thought of it in that way. But it's one of the reasons I don't think downloading will take over from the ritual of buying and leafing through the cover and putting the music on.

HOW DIFFERENT IS YOUR NEW ALBUM FROM THE PREVIOUS ALBUMS?

It's following a similar format. There's original art on the front and lyrics. I think it's an improvement on what we did before. It juxtaposes punk with Victorian elements.

YOUR MUSIC CAN BE APTLY DESCRIBED AS AMERICANA IN A VERY TRUE SENSE, HOW DO YOU SEE THE SHACK SHAKERS DEVELOPING THAT?

We have already expanded the terminology from Southern Gothic to American Gothic. We're drawing from polka and latin, klezmer and all these other forms that aren't necessarily southern. There are those elements like Texas polka of course, there's a lot of traditions born out of the same pain that the blues was born out of that grip me and get under my skin. So it's why stop at blues, why stop at rockabilly or any of these other forms? You take from everything and anything that can get people moving and let it all out. It's about the release of those inner demons.

SO DOES GOVERNMENT POLICY HAVE ANY DIRECT EFFECT ON YOUR WRITING?

No, it's nothing political. It's more personal demons. That stuff comes and goes and it kind of relegates you to the here and now, the ephemeral. It kind of dates you, it's like watching old Bugs Bunny cartoons when they're lampooning Truman or something. It seems to stand the test of time and that is important. You can take the music and you can use it to release your frustrations, whatever they're born out of, the Bush administration or if your girlfriend has just left you, whatever. Or even if you're happy you don't have to be pissed off. Hopefully it's music for all occasions. That's what we are aiming for. I think the stuff that's worked over time and over the years is the music that was born out of the village. The big communal hoedown. Where people sweat out their emotions. The square dance meets the town polka.

THE MUSIC ON THE ALBUMS IS A MORE COMPLEX AND LAYERED FORM THAN THE STRIPPED DOWN FULL ON ASSAULT OF THE LIVE SHOW...

Yeah, the tempos are all speeded up. It's to raise the heartbeat. We prefer to be the mean and lean punk rock band that we are inside instead of the art project that the records are. And we wanted to meet in the middle on the next record, which I think we have done and that we can carry that forward on the next albums then I think that we're really getting somewhere.

I'M SURPRISED THE BAND ISN'T BIGGER...

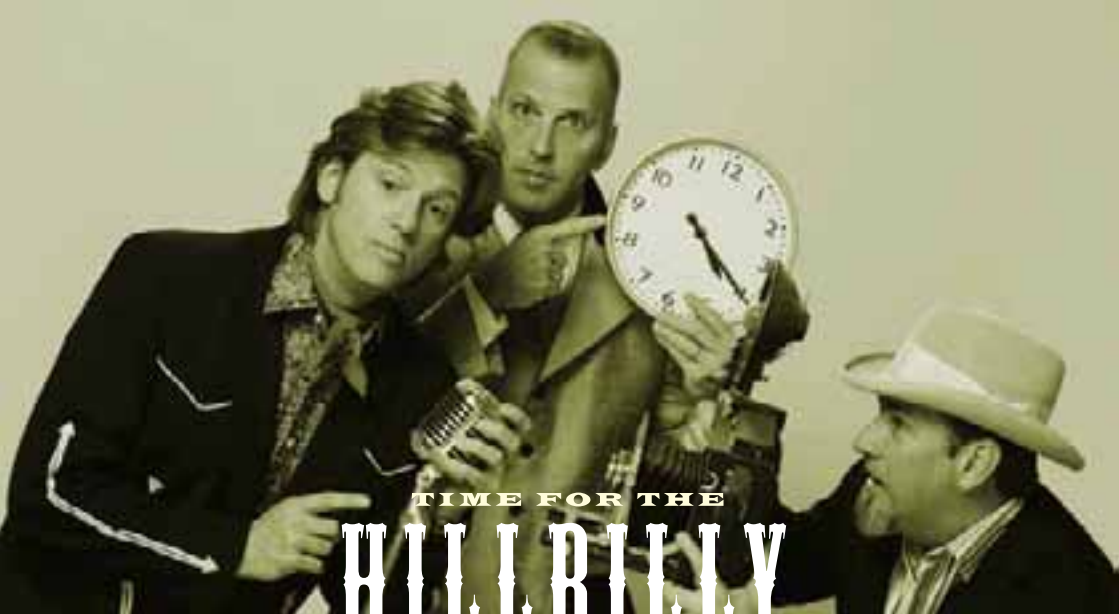
Well we're not a major label band, so there's less marketing. So we haven't been given the opportunity. Something's been holding us back and it's not like we're not trying, so when you go to a new city and your CD isn't in the record store, who do you blame? We have to get to that point where we are a major label act, with a label spending money on us and believing in us. If that doesn't happen then we have to change things.



The Derailers - Austin, Texas



Jimme Dale Gimore - Whelans, Dublin



TIME FOR THE

HILLBILLY

ROBERT REYNOLDS PAUL DEAKIN CHUCK MEAD

ALLSTARS

Robert Reynolds and Paul Deakin are regular visitors to Ireland, both as members of the Mavericks and also as players in Kevin Montgomery's band The Road Trippers. They are here with Kevin on a short full band tour, part of Kevin's ambitious attempt to play 364 gigs this year. The other two members include Al Perkins on lap, pedal steel and Telecaster guitars and vocals and Mike McAdams on lead guitar and vocals, a formidable unit. Before the gig at Whelans. We talked about the reformation of the Mavericks with a CD and DVD being released and how the band is still in existence, despite some denials, and the departure, again, of lead singer Raul Malo.

Robert was at pains to point out that he and Paul owned the Mavericks name and while they didn't rule out working with Raul again, the didn't exclude either the possibility of working with another vocalist, or series of vocalists. They have indeed recorded a track for a compilation with Thad Cockerell as vocalist. *Paul* "He stayed with me for awhile and he just lives music 24/7 and his voice is one of the finest around". Robert "He has a very special, honest voice and has been a huge fan of the total Mavericks package for a long time. While some go with the "Mavericks are Raul" theory, and certainly Raul has been integral, I'm honest with myself about that. He's the engine. But Thad always thought that there was some-

thing to the overall sound of the band and he really embraced the idea of working with us". *Paul* "So I wouldn't rule out the idea of the Mavericks featuring Thad Cockerell, or whoever. It could be a series of guest singers". Robert "Often bands do revolve around lead singers, which quite often is what lead singers think. Raul with his gorgeous voice may have a big hit doing something Harry Connick-like and part of me says I hope he does. I always thought it was better to have a rough and tumble rock band behind it than to go with the obvious. That being a kind of crooner thing. It's been said that the latter day Mavericks were like the world's highest paid wedding band..." *Paul* "Yeah, I've said that".

But on to more positive thoughts and ventures. As well as playing in the Road Trippers there has been a lot of activity for the duo from an upcoming band project to a more straight country venture with Chuck Mead (of BR549) and Robert's work on his own solo recordings (at gigs you can buy his two extended play works-in-progress CDs). *Paul* "Robert and I have been down to Key West, to play a back-to-your-roots bar gig there. A paid vacation. And down there we met a guy that Robert had known called Matt King. So we hung out with him and he had a show up in Nashville opening up for Buddy Guy and he asked Robert and I to back him. So we ended up doing

that and the first rehearsal felt really good. And also it felt good to hang out together, he has the same kind of spirit as us. His manager, Bob Tilley, said that we should work as a band and that it would be great for Matt. We talked about it for a number of months and the more we talked the more we wanted to do it. He had a connection with the producer Jai Joyce, who produces Patti Griffin amongst others, so they got him to come see us in a studio that Robert had booked. To get things moving forward, it was a "let's get in there and see what happens situation". So we recorded one day and then Jai came in to listen, and he's very busy, so he listened and said "take everything out except the bass drum and guitar" and he said "that sounds cool". He asked us if we were going to do anything else but said he was short on time but he ended up staying there eleven hours. And he came back the next day and also the next week. And we'd cut ten songs with him. Not that that is necessarily an album. We signed on as a spec production deal so it's in his hands now. The basic tracks are done and he has the stems back at his studio and he's putting his magic on them".

HOW WILL THIS WORK AS A BAND OR A SOLO THING?

Robert "It's a band. Matt said upfront that "he was tired of going it alone, I don't really want to be a solo artist, I'm looking for the camaraderie of a band". His spirit is in line with ours and he has approached this in the band context. There are ways we can get around the publishing all falling into one man's pocket. Either by co-writing or rewarding the band in some way. In fact just talking about things like that can be so integral to knowing where someone really sits on idea of partnering-up. There's a long, long road from the day you record something to it becoming any kind of a hit, or even out on an album. You have to decide if you're going to work in that area of sharing or you're not". *Paul* "The Mavericks did that a bit at the start". *Robert* "But there was resentment". *Paul* "In the beginning Raul agreed to that but I think he resented it". *Robert* "Nashville has built a very old fashioned greedy system of publishers

and writers who get very territorial and they don't usually recognise the way that acts like REM or U2 work in that context. It's more like "the writer's the writer" and the publisher takes whatever he's finagled, which can be quite high as well. I remember, we hadn't been in Nashville a year, when Raul wanted to call a meeting about publishing and he said "it doesn't work the way we set this up". *Robert* "I said no, that that was just one interpretation. That there are many ways to do this thing. We lived by our agreement but it was never embraced". *Paul* "That's why it's nice having someone like Matt who's an pretty established writer saying that he wants to have that camaraderie within the band. And when we were in the studio with Jai Joyce we wrote two songs in there, as spur-of-the-moment things". *Robert* "Paul wasn't told to go and have a coffee break, he contributed lyrics but it was the music as much as anything that we were involved with. Matt had written some very stream-of-consciousness lyrics as we were playing. Paul was already coming up with the drum pattern and he said "I want to put a vibe part down on this". So we were really writing music on the spot and it was at one-thirty, two o'clock at night and the boys were shutting the machines down for the night. So I ran in and said "No, fire it back up we want to record this thing now". So it's all fired back up and we go and cut this tune. *Paul* "At the end of it Robert was saying, and I have to go along with him, that it was the best musical experience, in the studio, that we have ever had. It reminded me of the experience of working with Nick Lowe. When you have that inspiration, working with a producer where you don't really know where it's going to go and for it to come out as good as it does and has, so far, is exciting. *Robert* "We'd had one production meeting with Jai to try to have him come on board and it was like an hour at best and we discussed what we were trying to accomplish. He immediately made it clear that he was interested in something that was honest. He did want a manufactured sound, that's not what he's interested in. Like working with Nick, he had this thing of embracing the warts. Taking



the raw data and working with it. He made me feel freer in the playing area to do anything I wanted. Sometimes more whacked out that I would have dreamed of. I'm like "are you sure?" and he's saying "go for it, it will be really cool". Paul "He doesn't do it all in post either. He was doing stuff with a Fender Twin amp, in the drum room, feeding back. Robert "It was mighty, re-miking and re-amping the drums".

Robert "I have been searching E-Bay and other places for odd instruments, the 10, 20 or even 50 dollar kind. But I want them to be awful but maybe equally brilliant. I found a Sears electric banjo for the late 50's or early 60's, just an awful thing with big knobs, mini-Humbucker pickup, not a banjo banjo, a four string banjo for plucking on, and in the studio I said "Paul, grab that banjo and put it on your snare drum and play it with your sticks". It sounded brilliant. That's what that banjo was built for (laughs), we don't need Bela Fleck on that banjo". Paul "I got so off on his production. Like he went into a room where some friends were and he hears the chitter-chatter and he mikes up the room for this song we had about a meth lab. He never said he was going to do it he just went ahead and did it. I said when I heard it "is that bleed through?" And he says, "no I did it on purpose". Robert "He's very autonomous in his own way. He very much makes you fall in with him and his production methods. He's a soundscape master". Paul "One time he had me take a mike and a headset and go outside and start brushing the wall". Robert "Yeah, at eleven-thirty, twelve o'clock and people are going by and probably thinking "man, Paul's really hit a low spot, he's sweeping up in a studio".

THE HILLBILLY ALLSTARS

Robert "Well I was really combining the experiences that I'd had when I was doing the Buddy Holly tribute things that I do, which were never limited to just Buddy Holly, but I was a big fan and that was my excuse to do these things. Buddy's music is always just a joy to go and re-investigate. So from '97 to today I had done these random gigs. We'd just get on a bus with Mandy Barnett or Bill Lloyd, Pat de Nizio from the Smithereens, just great musicians, magical people, would come. We had invited Chuck Mead but he couldn't make it because of scheduling. It was a response to someone saying "Oh the Mavericks aren't available but, in essence, some part of that Mavericks spirit is very available. That used to piss me off that someone else was deciding how available I was. So I would be thinking about what I wanted to do and it would anger me that someone would take a call and shut me out of something. So I thought that besides Paul, and we've been lifelong friends, who else can I get involved with? And there was one other guy who I have never worked with and who I felt affinity with and that was Chuck Mead. I felt that I needed another musical director, front-man host, so I called Chuck and set up a

meeting with him. Chuck wanted time to process the idea and he had sat and listened to me. So 24 hours later he rang me back and said "Hey man, I'm all over this. I really like this idea. So I said "good, because I couldn't tell at the meeting. He said "No I didn't mean to seem that I wasn't interested because I was listening".

"Then over the coming weeks Paul and I talked some more and I wanted to prove it would work so I personally booked a date, a high-dollar date, I even impressed on some booking agents in Nashville that a lowly bass player from the Mavericks could book a date himself for good money. So I said to Paul I got \$18,500, who do we want on the show? So he said "Let's call Mark Collie". I thought great 'cus Mark is crazy, but good crazy and I love Mark. So I had to see if he was up for it and he was. He said "I'm all over this", which he is. Joy Lynn White I called her and she said "yeah, what do I got to do" I said "sing about 5 songs" and she said "I get paid to sing 5 songs?" I said "yeah, that's the deal". So it started to go from there". Paul "Thad did it with us also, Mark has had a profile as he has had top ten and number one hits in the States so we wanted someone with his marquee value as well as someone more on the outside, like critically acclaimed Joy Lynn as well as someone more unknown like Thad but all with that hillbilly spirit".

Robert "But you have to bear in mind that we didn't form a band we formed a live production. It wasn't a case of going to Paul and Chuck and saying 'let's form a band', it was more 'let's create a show'. The Hillbilly Allstars. Our goal is that when one person is in the spotlight that people are in love with what they hear and see and buy that person's merch. So it becomes a platform for these people and for the rest of us as well. The bass player from BR, Mark Miller, has been the bass player on the first few things. And he has his own solo stuff and he's a great singer too and so he does some of his tunes. So the rule is if it fits it fits.

The Future of it is to be a Hillbilly acid-trip. Rhinestone suits. And the dream is to have a full set design, with side-show canvas banners. Very quick paced. Singer does two songs and you say "she'll be back in a while". Paul "Both Robert and Chuck are great MC's as you know". Robert "Chuck knows how to put on a suit, I do too, but Chuck is great. That's what were after and it's really working. A promoter in Toronto who loved The Mavericks saw the show and said it was one of his favourite shows that he'd ever seen. He in his mid-twenties and he's a booking agent. I met him a fair buyer's convention in Vegas, I'd flown out to do the whole thing, the meet and greet to say "here's what I'm selling". I got a lot of contact and that guy is booking a lot of summer festivals, all for real money. It's just up to us to put on a show that will knock them out". Paul "That takes us back to the Mavericks as we always felt that there was something else to the Mavericks other than Raul's world class voice, and that

wasn't necessarily incredible musicality it was just balls-to-the-wall fun and spirit. So if we can wrap that up in this project then that's when I say that the Mavericks aren't finished. The spirit is still there". Robert "When we promote these shows it's Chuck Mead from BR549 and Robert Reynolds and Paul Deakin from the Mavericks". Then all the stars of the show and every musician is treated with great respect.

We are talking about doing a show under a heading like Waltz Across Texas and getting guys like Joe Ely to guest. Making it very visual and maybe filming it for DVD release. He would be backed up by the Hillbilly Allstars and do a song he's loved since childhood or one he's written". Paul "Or it could be city based, like Chicago where it wouldn't be that far-fetched to have Jack White come out to do a show. Robert "Even Mark Collie has said that we could go out to Los Angeles and he thought that before we do House Of The Blues which the Mavericks have done, we could do the Troubadour and he'd bring his Hollywood friends like Billy Bob Thornton. They'd give it a stamp of approval, because in the end it's a production and that stuff carries weight. Mark has some great ideas. And John Lee, who's helping out on the business side, has some great ideas. We would look at sharing the costs of doing things, with good independents, rather than them paying for everything and "expecting huge repayments".



Allstars left to right: Robert Reynolds, Chuck Mead, Paul Deakin and Mark Collie

Finally to marrying the two things, Matt King, (the band, by the way is called Limberjack) that fits right in that Matt can come out on any given night as Limberjack could be an opening twenty minute slot for the Hillbilly Allstars and then we fold into that and Matt could come out as a solo artist and do some songs. So one is production and performance based and the other studio and live. We can morph and mutate between the two. But the Hillbilly Allstars we can just do if someone says can you be there tomorrow night. If Chuck, or any of us, couldn't make an Allstars date we would still have a hell of a show and we all would still be very respectful of the production. With Donnie Herron doing his Dylan dates Chuck has to consider his options too and he is very much a part of this as well as with BR5, we are working it around everybody's schedules".

Interview by Steve Rapid



Lonesome Highway took the opportunity to talk further to one of its favourite drummers about his influences and about his early days in music.

What influences did you have that you wanted to be a drummer?

The Beatles of course, I was born in 1959 so I heard them through my brothers and sisters. I was probably more into the Monkees. I started playing when I was very young. Not very seriously but I had a little toy drum set from when I was about 6 years old. I was always banging on things then too. So why do you become a musician... it's because you're not good at sports and you need to pick up girls. When you get to junior high it's one of the only ways to meet girls if you're not a sports person. I got into drums in the seventh grade and I started taking proper lessons. I was fortunate to grow up in Miami where the university was one of the top places in terms of music in the world. It had a great jazz department. They taught out of that so it was just local music lessons. It was a really good program, and you learned everything from theory to rudiments. Not just the marching band stuff but all styles. That really exposed me to drummers like Elvin Jones when I was thirteen. Not a lot of people were at that age. I also listened to Neil Pert, but actually I didn't know who he was till I was about eighteen. That was, however, never my proclivity, even though I was blown

away by some of the things that those guys can do. But that started me off on playing the drums. I love playing jazz and playing texturally but then I got into a funk band in my early college days, a funk band and also a punk band. I leaned towards Charlie Watts, more than anybody, he's about my favourite drummer. Another one, who I just recently saw, is Tommy Shannon the drummer from Double Trouble, I saw him live in a club and he was somebody who could just play a groove and you can feel so much with it. It's about getting your spirit through when you're just playing.

Besides listening to the music that I like I've been exposed to a lot of other things. When I studied at college there was a guy named Steve Bagby, Jack De Johnette's drummer. This was when Jack was a piano player before he became a drummer himself, he was the most melodic drummer I'd ever seen live. Steve would do a jazz master drum class for seven drummers, we'd sit around each week and he'd have us play something and ask us what we were listening to. I'd mention the Clash, another one of my favourite drummers is Topper Headon, and he'd say that just because it's jazz that doesn't mean you have to play like a pussy. And he got on there and got into it. So that aggressiveness he would handle when it was needed. He showed me how to be emotive, how to get the things you need. That inspired me and the way I play. It is who you're playing with too. One of the favourite compliments that I was paid was that I was a songwriter's drummer. If I can get inside a song I'm doing it right. I'm so fully aware that I'm an accompaniest instrument and that's what I like. The most embarrassing moment is walking across the stage, once I'm behind the kit I'm fine. Not that I'm introverted but when you're up there it's a little bit fish in a fish bowl. So when I can get up there and be in my own world and can feel everything gelling in a band that is great and then it can extend into the audience and you have that energy too.

The music is obviously the core of what you do. Many people in the music industry would feel that going from staying in top hotels, as you did with the Mavericks to staying in a b&b or sleeping in the van again is a step backwards. But it's your love of playing that keeps you here...

Playing with somebody like Kevin (Montgomery) is great as he is so gracious about wanting everyone to have a good time, which is not always the case when you're backing someone up. We've been playing with Kevin about 5 or 6 years now and with the Mavericks not working, then working again and now back to not working we continued to do these tours with Kevin and they are truly a lot of fun. And Kevin pays us well. I think back on the money we wasted in the early days of the Mavericks, Day rooms at the Four Seasons and so on. It was the rock n' roll lifestyle and fun but one tour of the UK in a camper van and I wouldn't have had to work for ten years (laughs).

You recently played on a recording with Nick Kane (the Maverick's former guitarist) how was that?

It was great, I called him up and said "Nick we're going to be doing a project, a history of America seen through songs - which a lot of people like Lou Reed are also doing, so when it came about that we were going to be doing it without Raul - Robert had decided that Raul was not going to be involved and he and I own the Mavericks' name so we decided to go and do it without him - so we got Jerry Dale (McFadden) and Nick, I had to talk to Nick, he and Raul had problems, it was just oil and water, so he just said "is Raul Malo going to be involved?" So I said "no we're going to have Thad Cockrell doing the vocals, so he said "if Raul's not there I'll be there". He said "it's not that I hate the guy I just think that he's poison", So I said "fair enough". He came in and he had his ideas and he was much more cheerful that I remember him being. He's often thought of as gruff and he can be, but he was the smartest guy in the band by far. He's so knowledgeable on just about everything. The partnership was Raul, Robert and I and Nick was an addition, so he had some benefits of partnership but not full rights. But towards the end he was pretty unhappy and quit trying onstage and that showed so Raul convinced us that if the Mavericks were going to go on then Nick would have to go. So we were in our manager's office and called Nick in and he said "Am I fired" and we said it's not that simple and he said it is. So he was told "well I guess you are". Nick said " thanks, that's all I need to hear". He shook my hand and Robert's and he said " I got nothing against the two of you. see you later" then he walked out. Then three weeks later Raul quits the band. I'm like "you waited to fire him before you quit! " That was in 2000, and so when we got back together he was interested. And that's ok and I really liked working with Eddie (Perez) as well. And I made more money for the time that we regrouped so if Raul was using it as a stepping stone back into his solo career I don't hold that against him. I do wish that if we were ever to get back together that it would be more like spirit of the early days. You kind of hope that Raul would get back to that. And I actually think he did for a time. We were going to strip it back and leave out all the razzamatazz, even if it was going to be a more honkytonk record which we could now record for as fraction of what it used to cost. He was into that, as was Eddie but then Raul being who he is decided he couldn't do that anymore. Nobody has to continue being in a band if they don't feel right. But I believe in bands and Kevin's thing is pretty much a band set-up. The project with Matt King, Limberjack, is a band. My wife, who's a good judge of character and of music, said that the vibe between you guys is incredible, the music's good but the interaction is so strong. Matt is such a great guy. He had his ups and downs in Nashville but he come through. He also felt that we wouldn't be able to get the project through Nashville, but I don't know. There is Lost Highway Records and

other people like Universal South, so I think maybe we can do it that way. The pendulum always swings and a thing like Big and Rich, not my cup of tea, but getting there. So now it's starting to open up again and that why I think a band like Limberjack has a chance.

Do you play any other instruments?

I play a little guitar and a little bit of bass but I'm not a multi-instrumentalist. I can play vibes pretty efficiently but it's drums mostly. I play the guitar well enough to be able to write. That's something I'm looking forward to getting into. Robert writes a lot more than I do and has always written. Another thing was that back in the Mavericks Raul said that he was writing all the songs and he wouldn't sing any of the others. In this new venture it's open for all of us to write. Also doing the band (Hillbilly Allstars) with Chuck is great fun and he is a great guy.

How will you balance both projects?

Well the Hillbilly Allstars is more like a production, touring company it's something that Chuck and Robert and I will own, but because it is what it is, it will only work as much as we want it to. It depends on where it is going to. We're going to pretty much keep it as the three of us with guests. That's the core of it. But if it happened that Limberjack took off and Robert and I had to do work for that and there was something like a corporate date that didn't depend on any of us being there we would still have a great show with someone else sitting in. I see it as being at least 90% of the time it would be the core people.

You're still based in Nashville?

Oh yeah. I love it there. We haven't been signed to a Nashville label in over 5 years but it's home. Jai Joyce, the producer, is setting up a production deal that could, as we said, be with a Nashville label. The thing is that we can record so inexpensively now so that although we've done 10 songs, it could be that we do 10 more depending on the reaction. Jai really did help shape the sound, it was interesting in that he changed a lot of how we were doing things. He didn't want to hear the demos that Matt had done. He said "here's a guitar play me the songs" and he listened to those. He's not heavy-handed at all, but we were wet clay and he was able to mould us. So he's as responsible for where the sound is going as any one of us. Anything that will push the parameters in Nashville is good and the time is ripe to do that. You don't need or, in some cases, want a major label involved. Unless you have the right person in place it is likely it won't work. Someone like David Mead should be right up there but with label changes and people moving on he's got lost in the shuffle. That's part of the risk of signing with a major.

I'm 46 years old now with a five year old kid and I want to be around as much as I can. Or else doing something where I feel I'm providing for a better future.

Chuck Mead founded BR549 in the early 1990's after moving to Nashville and being involved with the revival of the music in the Lower Broadway honky-tonks. He initially played solo in the front window in Tootsies and famously took \$750 in tips from John Michael Montgomery who said that he'd pay \$25 for every Hank Williams Snr song Chuck could play. The money ran out before Chuck did. That story serves to illustrate the deep love that Mead and his contemporaries had for traditional country music, something very out of favour in those Hot New Country times. He gathered together a group of like minded players, including fellow songwriter and singer Gary Bennett under the name BR5-49. They gained a reputation, including making the pages of Billboard magazine, in Robert's Western Wear in 1993. They then signed with Arista and began a career that went through major labels to their current album Dog Days released on Dualtone Records. Along the way they have toured the world, supported the likes of Bob Dylan, and made a strong reputation as a live act. Since then they have lost some founder members but have continued to develop their particular take on country music. Chuck spoke to us backstage at the Midlands Festival.



Does your involvement with the Hillbilly Allstars mean that BR549 are on hold for the moment?

Well, we had put a record out at the beginning of this year, Dog Days, and we were out touring that for two and a half months. We also made one trip to Europe and were going to do a couple more shows, but as Donnie is still playing with Bob (Dylan) we're just laying low on BR right now. We will wait until Donnie can come and do dates with us, it just doesn't make sense to do them without him. So, I've been working on my own project. I've been writing a bunch of new songs. I'm trying to do something a little different than BR. Then of course I'm working with the Hillbilly Allstars, which is an autonomous collective. Hey, two big words (laughs). You can kinda be yourself in this band, and be in another band at the same time.

It's a great line-up, but maybe not a obvious one? Well, we've been friends with these guys for a long time. We had done tons of shows with the Mavericks. I've written songs with Raul. Robert called me a year or so ago and said "hey, let's try and put something together". It was something of a conceptual thing like we have so that we could go around and pick up certain people as we go along, a loose idea, and it sounded great. He had a private gig lined up in Abeline, Texas and we brought Collie along and it became full flowered retardation. And it was great because Mark is so full of heart and soul, he writes great songs and is a great performer. Charisma out the ass. You just know he's a star, you only have to look at him. He and I ended up writing a couple of songs together. And we're talking about writing some with Robert. At first we felt it was great as we didn't need a record deal, we didn't need a manager. We didn't need any of that crap. Our collective notoriety will carry the show and it has been doing but now we're thinking that we might end up doing a record of some kind because we've written songs together. That wouldn't take away from our own solo careers. You need to diversify in this business.

You have been using other singers on this project? Oh yeah, we have had Gail Davies, Elizabeth Cook and Joy Lynn White. We like to round it out with the female perspective, because it's a little like a Grand Ol Opry style thing.

What direction will your own solo project take? I'm not sure how to explain it but what I want to do now is something that is still me, but I come from a lot of other places, and I want some of that to come out too. So it would be ridiculous for me to do something that sounded like BR549, because we still have that, so I want to do something that sounds a little bit different. Push it in a different direction. I got some cool songs, and I've been writing with a bunch of different people. So I'm pretty excited about it really.

You have a song written with Guy Clark that's on his new album...

Yeah, I love Guy Clark. He and I have written a couple of songs together. He recorded Cinco De Mayo In Memphis, and he wrote Lower Broad Street Blues with me. He's one of those people that you can really learn a lot from. He would never say that right out, like "pay attention", but he commands it in his own way. I'm just happy that he passed a little of it on to me. That I don't just settle for letting something be normal; say what you mean, what you want to say. If you need to give it a second thought

then give it the time.

At this point Chuck heads to the main stage to catch Glen Campbell doing, one of Chuck's favourite songs, Witicha Linesman.

How was that?

He's not using an amp onstage! He has a direct box or something. I was all ready for that good Fender tremelo but he is playing his ass off and he is singing great. Glen Campbell, I mean how often do you get a chance to see him play?

Have you had a chance to hear Gary Bennett's album?

Yeah, it's great. In fact he and Chris Scruggs were playing a dual bill at the Exit Inn last night in Nashville. But as we were on our way over here we didn't get to see it. We have actually played a couple of gigs together, some benefits, I was doing my solo thing and he was doing his. So we had a chance to talk and catch up backstage.

How about Smilin' Jay (former BR5 bass player)?

He has a film and video production company, in Nashville, and he gets a lot of work. In fact I talked to him just the day before we came over here. I still see him a lot. We play golf together sometimes. And I go over to his house to have dinner. He showed up at my solo gig at the Opry plaza a couple of weeks ago.

So as well as the Allstars and BR5 are you actively working on a solo career?

Sure, I mean there's no reason not to do a whole bunch of different things. Where is it written that you have to limit yourself? In a certain sense I'm sure that those people who have been big BR5 fans will understand what I'm doing. I'm not going to totally shock them. I'm not going to be doing any thrash metal. Although I've nothing against that.

It works for Hank111...

Yeah, Shelton does it, and he makes a great job of it and that's where he comes from.

How do you feel the Americana thing is faring now?

I really don't know. It's hard to tell because there are so many people doing so many different things, so many good people out there. They've been trying to get the Americana thing off the ground for 10 years now. The people that are involved with it are great, real music fans, but it just doesn't seem to hold the same weight to the regular Billboard Top 40. But I'm glad someone is out there doing it. And I'm glad the genre exists and those people work hard to spread the word.

You must have though about that if anyone was

poised to have a good chance to make a breakthrough BR549 were it?

We had a good chance. I don't know exactly what happened. We did have a Top 40 album in the US on our first studio record. But through a series of things it never quite made it over the top. But we had a significant amount of success in the mainstream. They called it alternative country but we were just plain country music, in our eyes anyway (laughs). We were just trying to carry on a tradition and put our own little spin on it like everyone else. It would have been nice if they had kept playing the Cherokee Boogie record, which a lot of people wanted to do but for one reason or another it didn't happen.

Was radio resistant to it at that time?

Well, some stations were and others wanted to keep playing it but they had to move on to something else, they're only geared to go on so long on a certain track. If it had been handled a little differently it just might have gone over the top. I'm not taking away from anybody because everybody that was on our team then at the Arista family and our management busted their nuts twenty four hours a day to make it a success. We were too, we were the guys out there on the road 250 days a year, which is what you have to do, that's what it takes. There's no explaining why it does or doesn't work. But ten years later I don't have a job so... (laughs) something must be going well. I'm doing something right!

Have you considered any new production projects?

I talked to Dave (Roe - Chuck's co-producer on two multi-artist tribute albums) and we'd like to do something with a single artist. We got to work with a whole bunch of different people on those albums. All our friends got to be involved, some great musicians, because we knew that they would want to be involved. But it would be nice to be focused on one artist, or group. Any ideas?

What do you intend to focus on next?

I got to focus on me. That's going to sound very crass as it would appear written down and I like to look out for other people, but I need to concentrate on my work so that I can leave a mark in this world. And I still feel that I can leave a different mark than I already have. You keep trying to get better, the whole reason you do this is to try to become a better songwriter, a better singer, a better musician and to try to do different things. You have to keep yourself interested. I still have that drive in me, that I really want to do something other than just to be that retro boy.

Is your songwriting something you can make a career out of in it's own right?

Absolutely. I'd do that because the more you write the chances are that along with a lot of shit that you'd write, because everybody does, you will come up with two or three gems. You always set out to write a good song, I do anyway. I would love to have a gig like that where I had a publishing deal. I would go in there every day. If someone tells you that they are not trying to write a hit record they are lying their ass off. Hank Williams wanted hit records, Buck Owens wanted one. You know that they weren't writing a song just for it not to be heard.

Everyone wants to write a classic like Fairytale Of New York, a song that succeeds on all levels...

Exactly. I would love to be able that have a song that works like that. That's what you aspire to. It hits on so many emotional and true levels. That's a great example. I would love to have Tim McGraw cut one of my songs. It is ridiculous to say "I don't want that". How pretentious, to say something like that, in my eyes. Don't you want to get your point of view across? James Joyce didn't write just to read it himself. I love co-writing with different people. Hell, we started to work on two on the way over here. They can just fall out of you sometimes. I'm willing to try to work with just about anybody. I'd love to sit down and work with a very successful songwriter. In a sense you're picking their brain and you're learning, and maybe they are too, so what's the harm in that? I have written a couple of songs with a woman called Angelina Presley and she is going to be big. She sings great and she writes these amazing songs, she comes from Kentucky, she's the real deal, but it's not affected. She went to college and she learned. She's all heart and soul. People like that I'm really into. Give me a hit right away to show me how they do it. I'm learning all the time. Otherwise it's going to be terribly boring if you don't progress. And I play golf (laughs).

Interviews by Steve Rapid



RONNIE NORTON



ALEJANDRO ESCOVEDO

I'LL BE YOUR MIRROR

interview by **steve rapid**
photography by **ronnie norton**

Once acclaimed by *No Depression* magazine as their "artist of the decade" there is no doubt that Alejandro Escovedo has been at music's cutting edge, from his early days in punk band *The Nuns* to his role in seminal cow-punk band *Rank and File* through the *True Belivers* and on to exploring and refining his individual blend of strings and rock. After recovering from serious illness he has just released his first album in awhile, *The Boxing Mirror* and is currently touring behind that album. *Lonesome Highway* spoke to him after his very well received gig in Whelans.

What Influences did you bring into the music when you formed *The Nuns* in San Francisco?

Well, growing up I loved the Velvet Underground more than any other band in the world. So through them I followed the Stooges and the MC5. I listened to all the garage rock bands from LA. Limey and The Yanks, Eastside Band, bands you never really hear of. A band from San Diego called *Hardbuck* Boy a sort of *Stones/Doors* rip-off. All those type of bands. I'd loved the Yardbirds and the Pretty Things and bands like that. It was all based in that blues/r 'n' b angle. But, see, I didn't play guitar till I was 24 and I only did then because we were making a movie about the worst band in the world, and since we couldn't play we became that band. And that band became *The Nuns*, and then we ditched the movie and became the band. It's the story of many punk rock bands.

From there you went into *Rank and File*, the start of the cowpunk thing, how did that come about?

Well I grew up in Texas in San Antonio the first music I heard was Mexican music, country and western and early rock 'n' roll. I had a cousin Dolores who loved Elvis as well as Jerry Lee Lewis and Fats Domino and through her I got the rock. But through my parents I got the country influence. My Dad loved country and they both loved Mexican music. So that's

were all of that came from. When I moved from San Antonio, it was the late '50s early '60s so I heard the surf bands and then saw bands like Buffalo Springfield in a teen club. I saw Love, I saw Poco, I saw the International Submarine Band, all those bands. So one of the first things I did when I was in high-school... I went to one that they call a continuation school, kids go there when they can't adapt to regular high school. So they had a paper and the first album I reviewed was the Dillard and Clark Expedition. So that's what got me going with country, and as well a appreciation of the free spirit that the early rockers had. Chuck Berry and those guys. But really Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings were the biggest influence that we took to Rank and File because we liked to mix up reggae dub stuff with the country. Waylon, especially, had that feel to his music in the way the bass worked with the drums. So that's what got us going in that direction. Then there were other bands like the Bobby Fuller Four which were a big influence too.

You only played on their first album though?

It was kinda claustrophobic in the band as the brothers dominated the writing and singing. They had had more experience with touring and keeping a band together than I had. The other part was, and I must be honest about this, they saw me as a Johnny Thunders clone rather than as a country guitarist, which they were starting to frown upon, but which I thought was essential to making it different. I knew I couldn't be an Albert Lee. I wanted to take a real primitive approach to it the way were doing it, much like Johnny Cash had. But it didn't work out that way but it was a great band. And especially a great live band.

You brought your more rockin' earthy approach to the *True Belivers*?

Yes I did. We had also always talked about the band being

like the Faces or Mott The Hoople of the south-west. That spirit, camaraderie, something we didn't really have in the Rank days. We wanted it to be more democratic as far as guitar playing and songwriting.

There must be a sense of full circle in regards to the new album with both Jon Dee Graham (True Belivers guitarist) and John Cale (The Velvet Underground) involved. With John Cale's *Paris 1919* and his production work with the Stooges he seem like a perfect choice for producer.

Yeah, the two Johns. It was great to have him involved.

You have used strings throughout your solo career but in a different way.

I always wanted to marry the rock side and the strings. I had thought that the Velvets had done a wonderful job of it, at least with the viola, introducing dissonance into the music. I think that's what Cale brought to the record. An knowledge of the avant-garde and he also has an appreciation of early roots rock and roll. We'd be playing a song and he'd say that it was really like a Doug Sahm song. That kind of surprised me because I didn't know that he was into that. But he loves all that stuff. I always loved the Shirelles, the girl group, because their harmonies were somewhat dissonant. They weren't like perfect harmonies, like the Beach Boys, the angelic harmonies. They had this weird thing that I think both Eno and Cale have on their records when they use harmonies. It's a bit askew and I love that.

Well you grew up in the early 50's when harmonies and structure were pretty much a part of every band's approach to making music...

Absolutely. band's had those four part harmonies and often really complicated stuff. Every band on the block had guys doing these harmonies. It really interesting and that where I soaked all that stuff up.

How much of your Mexican-American heritage is in your music?

It really came to the fore front when I did the album *By The Hand Of The Father*. It's funny, when my brother and I started the Believers, we were just the two of us before we got Jon Dee in later on. We had heard bands like ? and The Mysterions, the Midnighters, or Sam The Sham. We though we were playing like the Dolls but then sometimes the guitar parts would sound like Santo and Johnny. It always been there with us and with my brothers who are also musicians. It was a kind of subliminal magic that seeped into us.

But you didn't go for the multi-rhythmic way that is the more usual approach.

I saw this documentary the other night on the Amazon they were talking about this symphony that they had had there and what they had done was they played classic pieces but they incorporated images of the indigenous indian and the rhythms of the Brazilian music, it was beautiful, the mix.

Is there a visual aspect to your music that you would like to explore?

I have never done that. I've never had a video. So that's still one thing that I would love to do. I hope in the next couple of years that we make a movie. We've had offers from people to document the history of the music and the bands.

Do you enjoy playing Europe?

Well, it's been really interesting. In some parts they're colder. You walk down a street and say "how's it going" and they look at you like you've come from Mars. In Texas, and I live out in the country, when you're out you're always saying hi, to whoever. I'll tell you one thing I can't get used to though is the soccer hooligans. All of my friends always wanted to go to England but I was kind of frightened of going. I had heard that they didn't care for pakistani or eastern Indians and so on. And I was sure that I would be mistaken for one. And sure enough when I went to Germany the first time, shortly after the wall had come down, I ended up in a bad place in North East Germany, I was on a train and there were these guys who hasselled me and I was lucky to have escaped alive from them. When I got home there was an article in the New York Times about a man who had been beaten to death in the same area. I went home thinking that I would never go to Europe again. But slowly and surely I have come back and I have found that, like in America, every part is different. Each place has it's own culture and atmosphere. The thing that I love about Ireland is that the people are so warm and friendly. I went to Glasgow, sometime back and I saw more fights in one night there than I seen in a couple of years back home. So that stuff frightens me.

How do you find Europeans react to you?

It's interesting because when we come to Europe, especially in Germany, I get the attitude from people that "your president, your government sucks, blah, blah, blah. All down the line. So I then tend to get a little defensive and I don't dig that kind of patriotism at all, on any level. At the same time I feel well I didn't vote for Bush, I didn't vote for Nixon, I didn't vote for any of these guys. And I disagree with a lot of the government policies but the difference being that in Europe people take to the streets and change things when they're unhappy. In America people are very complacent. But as regards the music the reception has been so good. I don't think what we are doing has been seen before. The show tonight was so special.





MIDLANDS FESTIVAL FAVOURITES





CORB LUND

EVERYONE AROUND
THE WORLD KNOWS ABOUT
THE COWBOY

Corb Lund's music is the continuation of the tradition that finds artists bringing something of their family's cowboy history into their music, both from a historical and contemporary perspective. For his last two albums Corb has worked with Harry Stinson as producer, recording in Nashville, and he has brought his music to a wider audience through these albums and constant touring. He recently played the Kilkenny Rhythm and Roots weekend but we caught up with him on the night he supported Josh Ritter at Christchurch Cathedral. He had a keen interest in local history and asked a lot of questions about our traditions and complexities before we sat down to talk about his music and his roots.

Previously you have played punk rock and now you're playing country, any connection? They're both musics of the people and there is a kinship there.

So a logical point of progression then?

I come from a rustic, cattle rearing background and coming back to country music is interesting because I think if I hadn't gone into rock music then my music wouldn't be as good now. I don't think the writing would be as strong and the stuff that I write is a pretty good reflection of the two halves of my life. The first half of my life is very western, very cowboy while the second half is like underground rock.

So you were able to use that background as a source?

I'm pretty lucky in that I'm able to draw on my grandfathers who, along with my great grandparents, were working ranchers and so there is a wealth of material there. My grandfathers had a certain old fashioned mode of speech that was particular to rural westerners. So their stories were a great pool of material to draw from.

Was this based in a Canadian environment?

Not particularly. My ancestors were American, they came up from Arizona and Utah to raise cattle. So there's a handful of old, old cowboy songs that predate recording, a kind of oral history, like folk music that meant a lot to me. Songs like *Strawberry Roan*, *Little Joe The Wrangler*, *The Streets*

of Loredó and others that my grandfathers used to sing all the time. So the first songs I really remember identifying with were those type of songs. Those oral tradition cowboy songs. Now that I'm older I've investigated the music a lot deeper. So as a kid it was the American western stuff that I liked... Marty Robbins.

There seems to be a strong, if small, cowboy subculture about...

There are some really cool festivals in American, in the west that are called *Cowboy Poetry*. It's an interesting little sub-culture. There are a small but strong group of people who are adamant about maintaining what is a dying culture. The whole cattle thing in the west was based on cheap land and that's been in decline over the last hundred years. So that group of people are enthused about maintaining that art and culture.

But you don't exclusively draw from that one subject source?

My stuff has one foot in traditional cowboy music but another somewhere else entirely. I have played a few of those festivals and about half of my stuff works there. But we do have a young element to the audience also. We get a lot of the indie/punk kids coming out to our shows. And we are starting to get some airplay on the mainstream country shows too. It's kinda bizarre but it's cool. It's a very mixed audience overall. All my favourite guys can cross-over whether it's Willie Nelson or Neil Young, they all mix it up.

So the new album is coming from where?

When you're so close to the music it's sometimes hard to have an overview. I think that there is more Alberta stuff on the new record. Stylistically we cover a lot of ground, there's a western swing song, there's a couple of talking blues songs. The mood on it is a little more care-free but the next record may have a little more darkness to it. On this album some of my favourite tunes are the darker ones like the one with Ian Tyson, *The Rodeo's Over* or *The Truth Comes Out*. I'm a real sucker for the old fashioned stuff. It's an unending resource that you can always dig into. A hundred years of great stuff.

Is that lifestyle, cowboy life style still possible for a small rancher?

Ranching in Canada, in Alberta, is under the same kinds of pressure as in the States with more and

more cattle - beef production, being done in feed lots. Less and less is now free range. It's pretty much the same in Alberta as it is in Montana. The life style is under pressure for sure, as land is so much more valuable now, especially in Alberta, where it's very scenic. So land has become so valuable for building it has become very difficult to keep a big piece of land together. It's interesting as a lot of the guys back home, the older ranchers, who have had land in their families for generations are often very in tune with conservation issues. A lot of them are the original eco people from way back when. If there is a piece of land that has been in your family for hundreds of years you become very particular about maintaining it. Our place isn't very big anymore so my grandfathers are the last to have made a living purely from the land. My dad is a veterinarian. I'm so busy touring that I don't really have the time for it. I will though eventually end up on our family place. I rodeoed when I was young because the people around me did. As a culture, was only around, in it's heyday, for about a hundred years but it's left it's mark. Everyone around the world knows about the cowboy. It was a special time

How about those other artists that are coming from a similar background like Chris LeDoux or Wylie and the Wild West?

Chris LeDoux was someone who I was aware of but I haven't really heard much of his stuff. He wasn't a influence but I knew of him. I was more into some of George Strait's stuff. It's a little slick but good. I know Wylie. My father was in Montana and Wylie's father was also a veterinarian, and he's older than my Dad, but when my father was going to Vet school he used to go to Montana and when he was apprenticing there he met Wylie's Dad. In fact I had an e-mail from Wylie a couple of days ago to say that his family had one of my Dad's old bronc saddles.

How did you get your UK deal?

I got connected with Loose through Howie Gelb. He saw us play back in Canada and e-mailed me out of the blue one day and asked me if I had a deal in England so he told me to get in touch with Tom. So I owe him a bottle of whiskey for that.

Who have you with you on this trip?

My guitarist Grant (Siemens), when we have the full band he plays Telecaster, and steel and banjo.

Do you think that there are still new songs to write on the subject?

I feel like I'm in something of a unique position because of my background and family ancestry and stuff. So, so far we have been able to reach a fairly wide audience. I feel responsible for doing my little bit to maintain that culture. There's a ton of going down the trail chasing the cattle songs but what I'm trying to do is a reflection of my own headspace. What is it like to be alive in the 21st century, with this background, but to be confronted with modern life. That is where Ian Tyson is coming from too but in a different way. He writes a lot about the impact of modern life on cowboy culture. My favourite album of Ian's is *Old Corrals and Sagebrush* and *Cowboyography* is good too.

What criteria do you hold for recording?

I'm always paranoid that our music might become a little slick as I want it to have that edginess. On the western swing song on the album the guys doing the back up harmonies are Riders In The Sky. Harry (Stinson) just called them up. That's a great advantage of working with Harry down in Tennessee, he knows so many people and he can just call them up. I don't have any particular attachment to recording in Tennessee but that's where Harry works and as he so busy working with Marty (Stuart) he can't really take off for too long. When we were there were usually recording so we don't get too much time to hang out.

Do you have much radio support back home?

We have been supported for years by college radio and as I said earlier against all odds we have started to get played on the mainstream Canadian country stations too, we stick out like a sore thumb. But if we can be one of the acts responsible for opening the door for people to listen to some real country that's good. There is not a whole lot of rural content in today's country so I think that despite the fact that we sound a little different I think that the lyrical content is resonating with a lot of people who live in the country. So it's kind ironic that though we're sort of the black sheep our songs are more in tune with their lives.

Who do you currently like to listen to?

I have always been a sucker for story songs. As

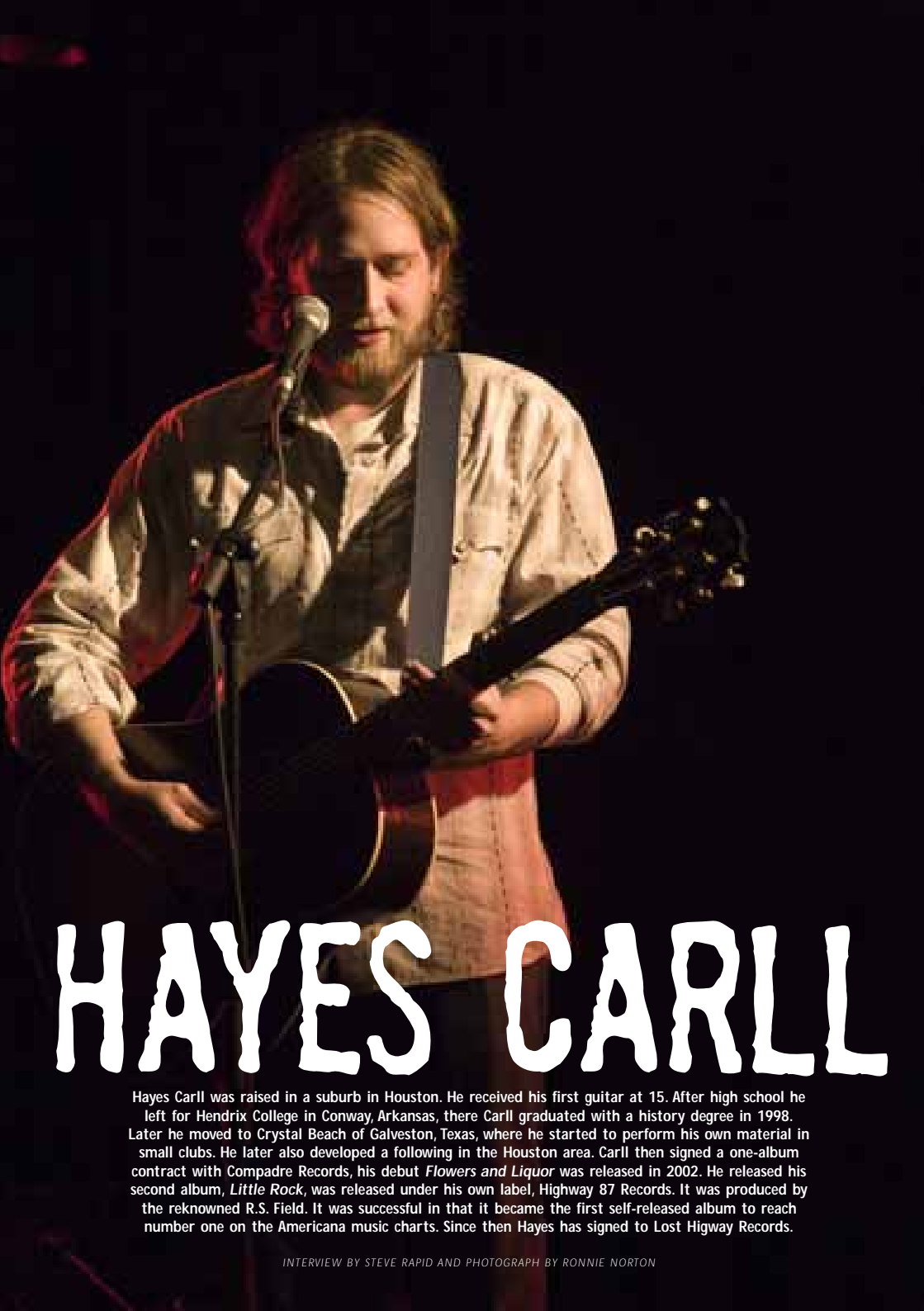
regards contemporaries I'm a real big Neko Case fan, she's fantastic. I think Richard Buckner's really good too. I like Fred Eaglesmith a lot, half his show is listening to his stories.

Have you enjoyed playing here?

Ireland's been fun, touring with Josh (Ritter), we've done the UK three or four times but never made it over here before. We've felt very welcome and it's been good.

*Interview by Steve Rapid
Photography by Ronnie Norton*





HAYES CARLL

Hayes Carll was raised in a suburb in Houston. He received his first guitar at 15. After high school he left for Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas, there Carll graduated with a history degree in 1998. Later he moved to Crystal Beach of Galveston, Texas, where he started to perform his own material in small clubs. He later also developed a following in the Houston area. Carll then signed a one-album contract with Compadre Records, his debut *Flowers and Liquor* was released in 2002. He released his second album, *Little Rock*, was released under his own label, Highway 87 Records. It was produced by the renowned R.S. Field. It was successful in that it became the first self-released album to reach number one on the Americana music charts. Since then Hayes has signed to Lost Highway Records.

INTERVIEW BY STEVE RAPID AND PHOTOGRAPH BY RONNIE NORTON

You live in Houston rather than Austin?

I tried Austin for a little while but it didn't work out.

So far you have released two albums are you preparing a third?

Yeah, I'm just writing right now and trying to get a record deal done. Hopefully that will mean that we will be able to go into the studio in the summer. But right now I don't have anything to record. So I'm trying to let the business side work itself out so I can get back to writing. I've never toured as much as I have done this past year and it's been a challenge being on the road so much. For my first record I'd been in the same place for six months without even talking to anybody so I had nothing to do but write. Now though, I have very little time, so I have to carve out time to write, and that's a bit different.

After working with Lisa Morales on the first album and RS Field on the most recent release have you made any decision on who you would like to work with on the next album?

I'm not real sure. A lot of that will depend on the songs and right now I have know real idea which direction that the album will take. Some of what I've been writing is similar to the previous stuff but lately I've been thinking about heading off in a different direction. So the producer and the time of record I make, as I said, will depend on the songs.

So at what point in the writing process do you become aware of the direction that a particular set of songs is pointing you?

Well with the first record it was... well I'm not sure I ever got it... as I'd never been in a studio or played with a band. I had my songs and I'd played them solo for years. So it was up to Lisa to figure out how to make them work. I had no input other than to say "that's too loud or I want it top be more country". I had no real direction that I could add to it. With RS I had a bit of a better idea of what I wanted to do but I still wasn't good at articulating that. That was part of the reason that I chose him because he is good at explaining the process and pinning down a certain sound. It's good to work in the studio with someone who can say "we gonna a Georgia Satellites of a Faces, but drunker, sound". He knows what were going for. So I really enjoyed that as my jargon and terminology in the studio is really limited. I have no musical training and, up to then, it was just about the songwriting, so having someone who can articulate that helps a lot. Otherwise it's just me saying make it dirtier or make it louder.

So when did you start to write and who influenced you to start?

First off it was Dylan. That then lead to others, the first one who jumps out is Kristofferson, then John Prine then to Lyle Lovatt. After that it kinda got to me checking out some more obscure singer/songwriters. But I became pretty close-minded about what I was listening to. Earliest on it was just country music. It was kind of around everywhere, though not so much at home, my parents didn't have it playing on the radio. But everytime we got in the car or with friends at school - living in Texas it was hard not to have it surround you as it's just part of the culture to a certain degree. So I certainly grew up aware of Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson and folks like that.

Did you ever react against that as the music of an older generation?

As my parents didn't really listen to music I didn't have that. So I didn't have anything to rebel against from that end. My first love was country music and then I got into Stevie Ray, Led Zeppelin or the Stones. I pretty much ran the gamut except for hip-hop or rap. So it was everything from classic rock to singer/songwriter to country. But from a certain point it was the lyrics, the stories that really grabbed me and got me excited. That may have had something to do with the fact that it was the only thing I thought I could do. I wasn't a singer and I wasn't a guitar player so I was just going to write and I never thought That I'd be doing what I do. I was doing other people's songs and eventually it got to where people would stop leaving the room when I sang! At first it was awful but I got to the point where I felt confident enough to play guitar and to do my own songs. Once I'd done that I was hooked. So I started listening to everyone I could in the same realm and tried to learn from them.

There is a strong element of humour in some of your songs was that something that also interested you?


There is, and lately I have had a hard time being funny, for some reason but it's definitely and element. If you watch a guy like Ray Wylie Hubbard or certain other people who may be incredible songwriters but if there is no interaction with the crowd or nothing to mix it up then no matter how good they are you tend to lose interest at some point. So when I would get up I only had a few songs and I wanted to be able to play like Townes van Zandt's stuff so I felt that if I just banged people over the heads with this they're not going to get it so I would try and mix in some humour and some kind of audience participation and just keep it going so I felt that if I can make 'em laugh then I can get them to cry some. But just doing the one over and over they might want to slit their wrists and walk out. That was how I approached it early on. I enjoy music with humour, something that can make you laugh and still tap your feet is a good thing.

Do you play in Europe often?

Well I lived in Croatia for half a year. I also spent some time in Paris and I've been to England a few times. But this is my first time in Ireland and also my first time to play in Norway. So I'm seeing some new places on this trip.

Do you travel on your own?

I've been on my own the last three nights but I will be with Buddy the rest of the tour. I didn't have a time to get too lonely with the travelling this time. But I've been a loner for most of my life so I do enjoy discovering cities and finding things out on my own.



Emmylou Harris

MIDLANDS FESTIVAL FAVOURITES

Ray Wylie Hubbard



Fred Eaglesmith and Willie P Bennett

fred eaglesmith “I try not to be Fred Eaglesmith when I'm writing”

Fred Eaglesmith was born in 1957 in Canada. He grew up on a series of farms in southern Ontario. He later started writing and playing music, influenced by Elvis and the sounds of roots music drifting in from far-away radio stations. He bought his first guitar with \$12 he'd earned doing farm chores. By age sixteen, Eaglesmith had left home, hopped freight trains out west and made his way back east to the farms of southern Ontario. After many acclaimed albums Eaglesmith is still out on the road. We spoke to him in Whelans on his latest Irish visit.

Your latest album *Dusty* seems like a departure from the albums preceding it, was it time to move on?

To me it's not that different. If you took my very first albums and you took *Dusty* you can see where they linked. But it was very different for those fans of mine who had come in half way through my career. I've taken a lot of abuse over it too, and there's been good stuff too. A lot of people don't like that album but the ones who love it really do get it. But the same thing happened with my *50 Odd Dollars* album I made in 1999. In that no one liked that album when it came out, but four years later it was being played to death. I think four or five years from now *Dusty* will get the same reaction.

When do you decide where the next album takes you?

Every time I make a move somebody's offended. But that's what an artist is supposed to do. If you're not pissing them off you're not doing good art, you know. So I'll keep doing whatever I feel like doing.

The direction an album will go, does that come from the mood of a particular set of songs that you've written?

It's a set of songs really. I have a lot of songs and I'm playing one and I think that it goes well with another one that I've written and then I write some more songs that are based around that guy. Sometimes, though, it's just a collection of songs which is something I haven't done very often in my life. I have to do what I feel and sometimes there's synchronicity between my fans and myself. Other times they go "what is he doing"?

The use of drum rhythms and loops seems to be a key factor in the make-up of *Dusty*.

Some people were so offended by some of those drum rhythms. And there's not that many on it really. Those rhythms are not like a modern drum machine they came from an old 60's organ call a Funmaker. And to tell the truth I wrote the songs (for *Dusty*) on that organ. It's great, you wake up in the morning, put on those rhythms and you can write songs. I love that it's called

a Funmaker too. Its funny that people from the 60's and 70's really couldn't get their head around it. Kids loved it, I had no trouble from them, that came from the old guard, they were treating it like church, saying "we don't like this, this is what you should be doing".

But you need to move on...

Well somebody has to push the envelope, and there's not that much pushing of the envelope these days. There is such a push to get onto Americana and alternative radio. All my friends who played rock are now playing alternative country. All the punkers are now playing country too. I'm going "you know I played this music in the 70's, so I think I can do now what I want to do".

Would a more extreme use of ambient sound, Daniel Lanois style, be something that would be of interest?

Not really. I'll tell you an interesting story here. When Daniel Lanois was in Hamilton, as a kid, he was working with Scott Merritt, my producer, and there's a similarity in approach which I don't think is one sided. In Dusty I think that we made an alternative, cutting-edge album. But nobody got it. Well, not everybody didn't get it but the majority didn't. Those that did went "oh this is great". Even radio that we'd felt for sure would get on it just rejected it. That's always good too in that tells me at 40 years old I'm still doing it. You know they kicked Vincent van Gogh right out of Holland and looked how they embraced him years later.

Is it easy to fit the songs from Dusty with your older material?

I don't tour an album. I don't push the latest album. You know the albums that sell the most for me are my bootlegs. I spend \$40 or 50,000 making an album and then the bootleg sells the most! I don't know anymore. I've 14 or 15 albums out now. A lot of new people come to my show and they end up buying the show album. We don't tell them to start with *Dusty* and we don't perform a lot from it. But then we didn't do stuff from *50 Odd Dollars* to a bunch of years later.

How do you tour now?

Now it's small just drums, mandolin and me. Sometimes I do it bluegrass. We play so many dates we do it differently to keep it fresh. There seems to be a real desire with this genre, whatever it is, to peg someone, to hold them to back. It's getting a lot like folk music in that respect. I don't want to be that guy, I wasn't before so I don't want to be part of a genre.

So is the Americana tag not a good thing?

It's helped me tremendously and bless their hearts but like I said, every punk I knew is now an Americana artist. Like the situation where Johnny Cash was no longer accepted as country. All those boys from California, with pony tails, were deciding what country was. Now some record stores in America even have their own A&R guy. Some 25 year old kid who's going to tell me what music I should be making, someone who wasn't even alive when I started playing this music. I'm not interested in the box that they put around the genre.

Do you have the opportunity to write when your touring?

I always have songs and I'm always writing. I have books and books of song as I wrote a lot more when I was a kid. But if I get to it I can write 20 songs pretty quickly. I don't write on the

road as much as I used to as I can find space at home now to do it.

Do you write mostly on guitar?

Banjo, guitar, piano anything I can lay my hands on.

The sound of each of those may give you a different mood...

Yeah, a different song. What I try not to be is Fred Eaglesmith when I'm writing. I just try to write a good song and Fred Eaglesmith just gets in the way.

Do you ever write with other people in mind?

I wrote in Nashville for about three years. I co-wrote and it was a really good lesson for me. I wrote with Chris Knight and Rod Picott. I wrote with some serious songwriters there. It was a good experience. In fact I just had a Nashville commercial act call me and said would I come down in January and write for them. They said that they were huge fans of mine, so I said that "I might sit down and write with you". But it has to be the right situation. I was doing that before with someone else and half way through they said "we're not doing this to just write a good song, this has got to sell". So I said "why don't you finish it then".

Is Canada a strong base for you right now?

Right now is a bad time for music in North America. The United States is really bad. I know it, though no one's talking about it. I can tell by pals of mine who are promoters there, they're saying "Fred, we got to have you on a Saturday night because it's so dismal now". They won't even do a Thursday night with anybody at the moment. So clubs are shortening their days. And also you can see by the number of North American artists coming to Europe. The economy's bad right now.

Is that a part of the political climate?

I think so. They have sucked themselves dry in Iraq. Now they have those hurricanes. It's tough there right now.

How does it affect you?

Well in a way it means my audience is consistent. Playing to 4,000 can very soon become 400 and that's a big drop. So a smaller audience tends to be there with you longer.

You control everything you do so that must make it easier to understand how it's working?

I think that I'm a point man for the economy as I can tell immediately how things are. I'm very careful. I have people to pay every week so I have to be aware of that. So I make sure that I have my hand on the pulse. The reason I'm a good business person is that I didn't want to do it. When I got to be good at business it took a lot less effort.

How is Europe for you?

Europe's been ok for me. I don't have a lot of presence here. I don't devote any time to marketing now. We go on word of mouth as I don't have any publicist as part of my office. I have a great time here though. My fans here are really devoted so if I get 50 in Whelans here tonight I know that they wanted to come. There's no buzz around me right now, especially after the kind of album I just made. In fact there's *negative* buzz. People will use any excuse not to go to a concert. "He's doing that Dusty thing" or they say we've seen him a bunch of times so they don't go. So I don't really know

what's in a fans head. There's a myth too that when you open for someone big that it rubs off, I've open for George Jones, Merle, I was supposed to open for Johnny Cash just before he got sick, I've done them all but it actually doesn't mean anything outside of that event. They go "well, that was good, I wonder who he was" but they don't wonder enough to find out. We have people who get into my music for awhile then we have a changing of the guard, a new bunch of people come along. We also have people who become devoted and buy everything I put out and come along to the shows. When we play somewhere... well we have a great internet site and it gets busy, so for a couple of weeks after a show we get all kinds of e-mails and people buying the CD's. I was very lucky in that in the early 90's a guy came up to me and said I want to do a web page for you. I didn't know what he was talking about but I said go for it, if it's free then do it. So I'm a pioneer in that area. A veteran of the internet. The sales off the site have been phenomenal. I sell 20 to 1 between the site and sales in record distribution, my internet site as compared with all the record stores in the world sell for me. It's amazing. But promotion, well I won't let them use the words "buzz" or "units" in my office. I won't let them read soundscans. We base our whole career on how many we manufacture. It means if I have to manufacture again that I sold all the first batch. If I don't have to manufacture the ones I made then I don't count them until they're gone. If I manufactured 5000 and I sold 2000 then they don't count until the full 5000 is sold. That's truth. That's how we can tell if our sales are up or down.

How political do you consider yourself?

Freedom of speech - whatever happened to that? As a writer I'm like an actor, a character shows up and I let him speak. I'm a real political writer but not a current event writer so much. Because you tend to find that five or ten years later people have changed their minds anyway. Look at Nixon. Now he's a hero. Neither do I pretend to understand it either, as everything I get is from the newspapers. And I don't believe them. So what I've been thinking about lately is people in their own little worlds. Local politics. What actually effects me. I heard a guy on the radio talking about AIDS and I thought it was so sad but wondered what can I do? I thought then that what I can do is to make sure is that me, and the people around me, act properly. I feel bad about it because this is where information can hurt us, as what does it mean to know these things if we can't do anything about them? I've been thinking about that a lot lately. The little guys in their own space.

What's the political climate like in Canada now?

There's a book called *Boom, Bust, Echo* and it's theory was that there is a boom then a collapse then a echo of that boom. So right now we're having this tremendous echo of that 80's boom in North America. It is just revolting. It's all greed and money and consumerism. On the ferry over to Ireland they were playing '80s music, horrible stuff. I can't believe I'm reliving that time as it was horrible for me. I'm having a flashback. And you know, just like the 80's, I don't understand any part of it. All these guys who retired at 55

and then went out and bought the loudest noisiest Harleys with their wives with matching stupid motorcycles and jackets. Then they go and disturb people. So you go "Really, this is what you worked all your lives to do? You're trying to be James Dean?". I can't believe I'm living through it again! You try, in the middle of this, to find some goodness. It's hard. "Big Muffler, little penis" - that's what I say. I'm doing an album right now in my shack at home and I'm mixing it and I hear this sound and I'm going "what!" and it turns out to be a motor cycle. They're like bees.

Interview by Steve Rapid. Photographs by Ronnie Norton

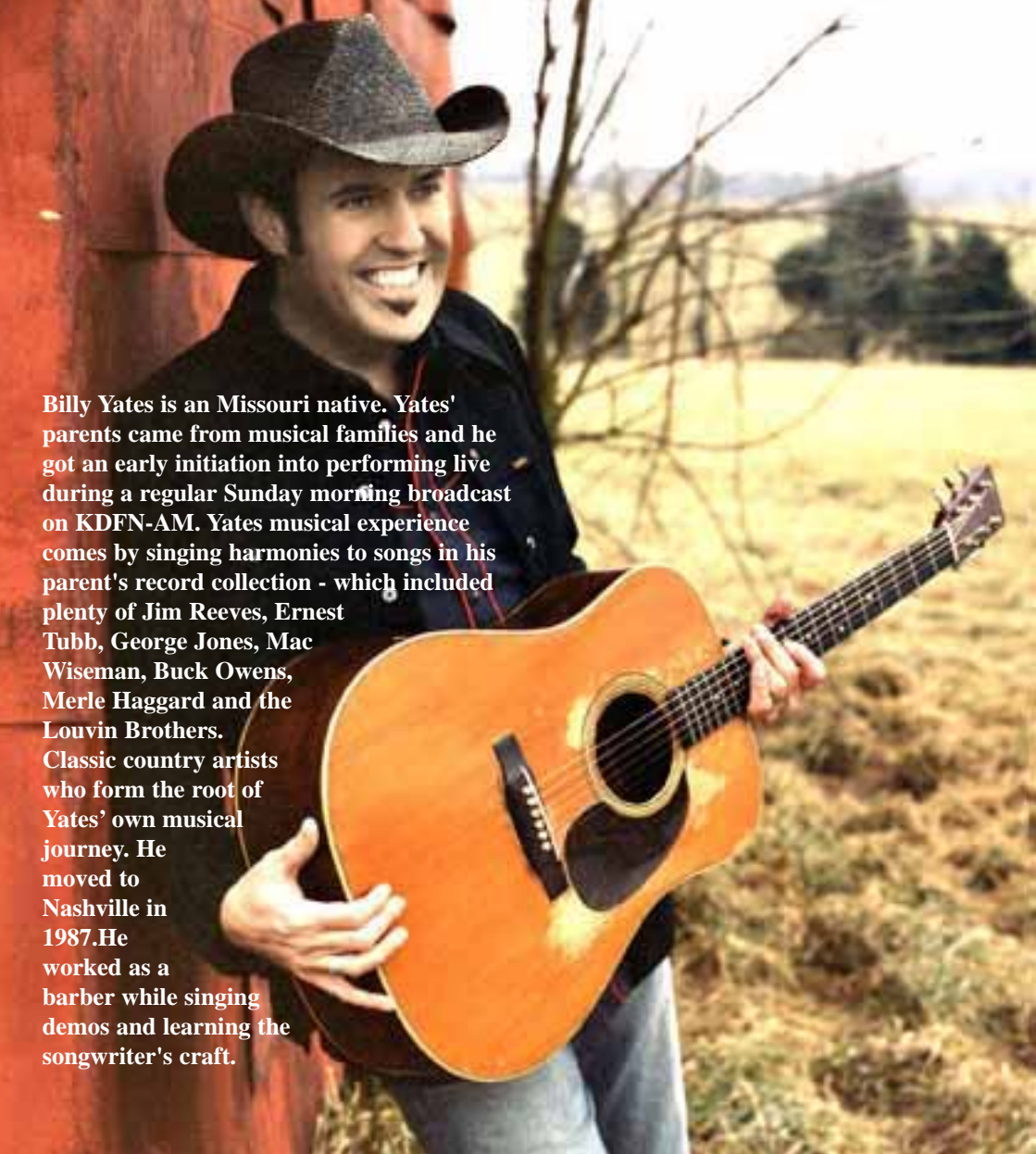
Hello Folks,

Welcome to the new issue as a PDF. Given the amount of interviews and reviews we had, we have made this a double issue. We have some additional interviews and more reviews in this version. There has been some very fine music available on CD, though most of continues to be available outside of local record shops. Which brings us to Miles Of Music. Specifically thanks to Corrie Gregory for recommending us to some of the acts that they distribute from their site (www.milesofmusic.com). We also need to thank those record companies who have made new releases available to us - especially to those smaller labels, whose representatives see Lonesome Highway as a greater benefit than do the more major labels.

Special thanks to Paul McGee for a his interview in this issue. To the artists who took the time to talk to us and to the agents, managers, press people and crew who facilitated this. And finally to all those who have contacted us to encourage our endeavours in any way.

This issue was written by Steve Rapid, edited and proofed by Sandy Harsch and photographed, with one or two exceptions, by Ronnie Norton.

You can contact us by writing to Lonesome Highway, Studio 2, 30 East Essex Street, Dublin 2, Ireland.

A photograph of Billy Yates, a man with a goatee, wearing a dark cowboy hat and a black shirt. He is smiling and holding a light-colored acoustic guitar. He is standing in front of a red wooden building, with a field and trees in the background.

Billy Yates is an Missouri native. Yates' parents came from musical families and he got an early initiation into performing live during a regular Sunday morning broadcast on KDFN-AM. Yates musical experience comes by singing harmonies to songs in his parent's record collection - which included plenty of Jim Reeves, Ernest Tubb, George Jones, Mac Wiseman, Buck Owens, Merle Haggard and the Louvin Brothers. Classic country artists who form the root of Yates' own musical journey. He moved to Nashville in 1987. He worked as a barber while singing demos and learning the songwriter's craft.

BILLY YATES yates country

"I'd much rather enjoy the music
and do it for the right reasons"

Yates released his self-titled debut album, which included the hit "Flowers", for the now defunct Almo Sounds label in 1997. Yates went on to record for Columbia Records but is now recording for his own M. O. D. Record Label for whom he has released 4 albums. He regularly visits Europe but has yet to play in Ireland. Those who like their country straight up should check him out at www.billyyates.com.

You were raised on a farm by parents who were both country music fans did you ever want to rebel against that?

No, I fell in love with country music as a child and never stopped loving it. I remember everyone else driving around our small town in Southeast Missouri listening to pop music. I was trying to tune in to the Grand Ole Opry.

You're music is obviously rooted in a traditional sound, and that's where your heart lies. How do you see your music developing in the future?

I plan to continue writing and recording what I'm most passionate about. I'll always love that kind of music. I do see taking this music to non country audiences around the world because this kind of music has not been discovered yet by some people. I believe if they hear it, they'll love it.

I recently played the Paradiso in Amsterdam, a predominately pop venue where large rock and pop artists play. We had our core country people there, but there were also non-country people in the audience. It was so cool. It was like they'd just discovered a new type of music and they loved it.

You were signed as a writer when you felt you weren't really one and that led to co-writing, which now seems to be your preferred choice. Do you work best in that mode?

I enjoy co-writing. I do write by myself probably more than I co-write. I just have a tendency to share my songs with other writers. I normally get to my office early and get something either finished or started. When my co-writer shows up, I share the idea with them. We often make it better and sometimes we leave it alone.

As a writer, with a lot of songs to your credit, do you feel that you have a lot more to learn?

You never stop learning. I write with so many people and I seem to learn from all of them. Sometimes it's just as important to pick up on what not to do. So even in bad co-writing situations, I try to learn something.

Having had deals with Almo and then Sony do you feel relieved now that you control your own releases?

My first deal was a developmental deal with RCA back in the 80's. Then I signed with Curb records in '92, Almo in '97 and Sony a few years after that. I enjoyed those opportunities and again learned so much from these labels. As I asked out of my last deal at Sony, I knew what I wanted to do with my knowledge. I wanted to start my own label, which is exactly what I did.

Would you consider a major label deal if one came your way, or do you think that they demand too much control from an artist?

Honestly, I recently passed on an offer from a major. It was flattering, but the freedom and the ownership of my own company was just not something that I felt comfortable giving up. At this point in my life and career, I'd much rather enjoy the music and do it for the right reason than to worry about pleasing a major.

What is the future now for country music from your perspective?

I tend to stay very optimistic. I think it will continue to evolve and there will always be crappy music made in Nashville, but there is also some great music coming out of this town. I want to believe that the music in the future will become more honest and real.

Country music now, to a large degree, seems to be defined as a particular political enclave for mainstream artists, does that effect your attitude and writing in any way?

I couldn't care less. I just do what I do. As a writer, it's my job to innovate. If I chase the trends I'm behind. If I innovate I'm hopefully writing what is popular a year or two from now.

At the moment you balance your writing with performing but in the long term to you have a preference for one over the other?

I enjoy them both equally. The only thing that would compare to the feeling of finishing a great song is the incredible feeling you get during a live show. I love them both.

You have had some success in Europe, how would you build on that in practical terms?

I plan to pace my career there. I have been very fortunate to have made some great friends and fans there. I want to continue my growth there over the next several years without over-saturating the market. I worked around 50 shows there last year and will do around 40 this year. I do want to take the show to some non-country venues when I can and continue to play the festivals. I have several great gigs already planned for '07 and beyond along with more plans to release singles over the next several years.

Interview by Steve Rapid

In his role as guitarist for hire Mike McAdam has played with Steve Earle's Dukes, Radney Foster and currently with Pinmonkey but what brings him to Ireland is his role as guitarist with The Roadtrippers, the excellent band that accompanies Kevin Montgomery on his frequent European tours. He also writes and records under his own name with, to date, one fine album to his credit.

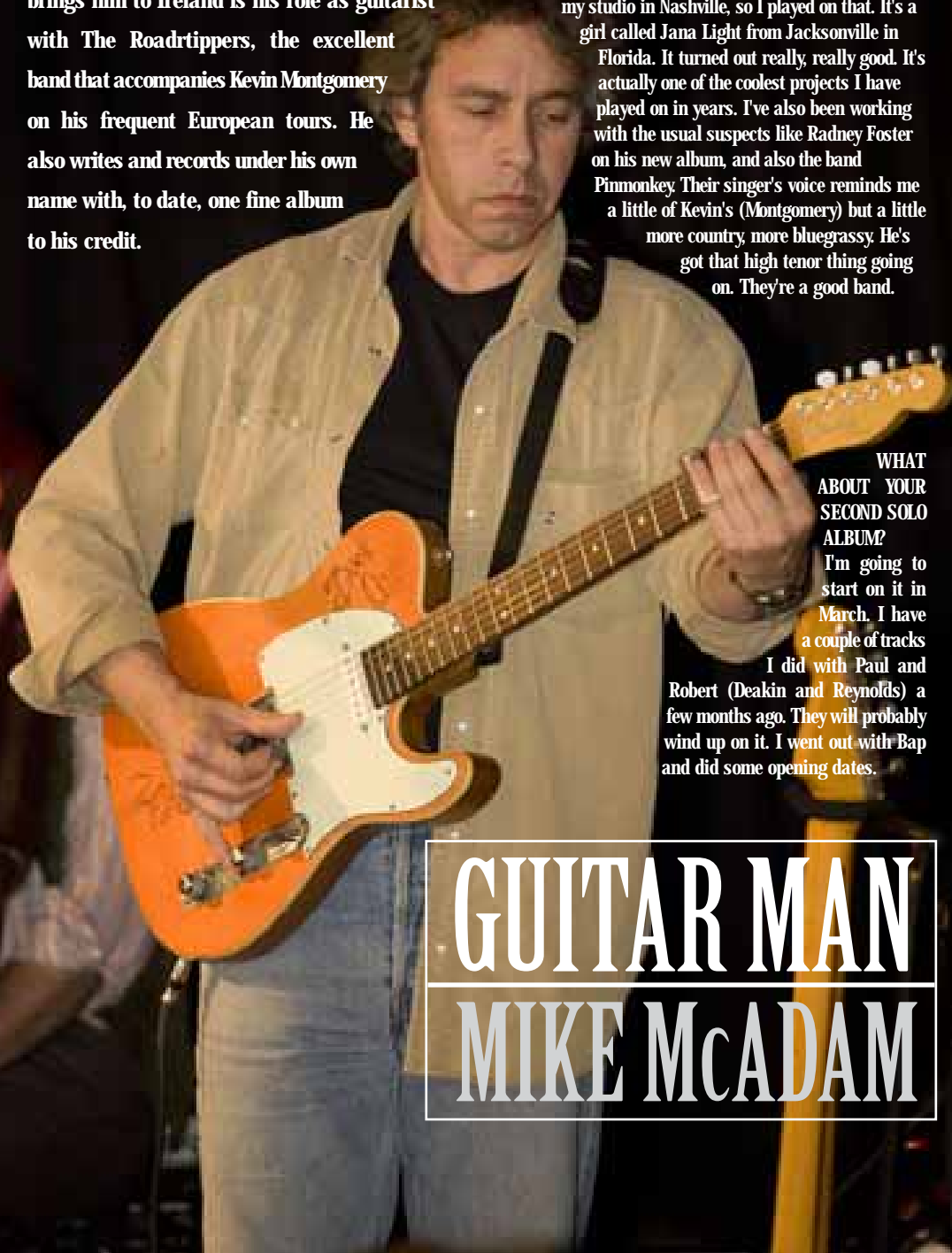
WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN UP TO LATELY?
Well I've been working with a whole different bunch of people and then getting ready to go do my own next record. I did a album recently with, well you probably know Bap Kennedy, right?... he was producing it at my studio in Nashville, so I played on that. It's a girl called Jana Light from Jacksonville in Florida. It turned out really, really good. It's actually one of the coolest projects I have played on in years. I've also been working with the usual suspects like Radney Foster on his new album, and also the band Pinmonkey. Their singer's voice reminds me a little of Kevin's (Montgomery) but a little more country, more bluegrassy. He's got that high tenor thing going on. They're a good band.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR SECOND SOLO ALBUM?
I'm going to start on it in March. I have a couple of tracks

I did with Paul and Robert (Deakin and Reynolds) a few months ago. They will probably wind up on it. I went out with Bap and did some opening dates.

GUITAR MAN

MIKE McADAM



DO YOU GET MORE SATISFACTION WORKING ON YOUR OWN SONGS THAN YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO OTHER ARTIST'S WORK?

In some ways, yeah. I like being able to do both. Recently we did an in-the-round song thing with Kevin, Robert and I, rather than the full band thing we're doing here tonight. We just alternated songs and that was fun. I enjoyed being able to do one of my songs in turn and to play guitar with everybody else.

WHAT SORT OF MATERIAL DO YOU HAVE LINED UP FOR THE ALBUM?

The stuff that I've got written for it is kinda all over the map. I think at times that I lack a little bit of focus. That's because I grew up listening to and playing so many different kinds of music. There's one thing that I've got that is kind of Stonesy and there's an electric bluegrass type of thing. One that '60s pop, sort of whatever happens, happens. I don't have the luxury of going in and doing a country record and then a pop record so I have to put them all on the one album (laughs).

IS THERE ANY ONE GENRE YOU PREFER OVER ANOTHER?

You know I don't know that I do. I love old r'n'b like Ray Charles and soul like Otis Redding and Sam Cooke. And of course the Beatles and Stones too. Straight country I love, but I don't like much of what they put out now, that has nothing to do with anything I like.

DO YOU LIKE TO EXPERIMENT WITH GUITAR SOUNDS?

I've got this thing that I do with the guitar to make it sound like a Wurlitzer. I also I play a lot of slide guitar and I listen to a lot of pedal steel players because of that and I've played with some great ones. My guys approach the slide from a blues perspective, which I do as well, but I do a lot of behind the slide technique. There are some real masters of that like Sonny Landreth. Ry Cooder was also a big influence. Most approach it initially from the Elmore James side, as straight blues. I try to adapt and bring in a lot more than just that one angle. It's also good to listen to saxophone players to get some of that feeling. So listening to other instruments is a real good thing to do.

SO YOU DRAW FROM A LOT OF AMERICAN ROOTS SOURCES?

Yes, though I don't listen to a whole lot of jazz. But I did listen to a real cool version of Caravan by Miles Davis in my car recently. Then I went home and worked it up on slide guitar. But, in truth, I don't listen to Miles Davis that much. But every now and then I hear something that I can understand (laughs).

WHO DO YOU LISTEN TO FOR PLEASURE?

I listen to a lot of old stuff: 60's pop and r'n'b. As regards new stuff I can't honestly say that I listen to all that much. But Robert and other friends do turn me on to some good stuff. Sometimes I hear a great track on a hip radio station and I will look further into that. But mostly it's stuff I listened to when I started playing and before, even thirties stuff.

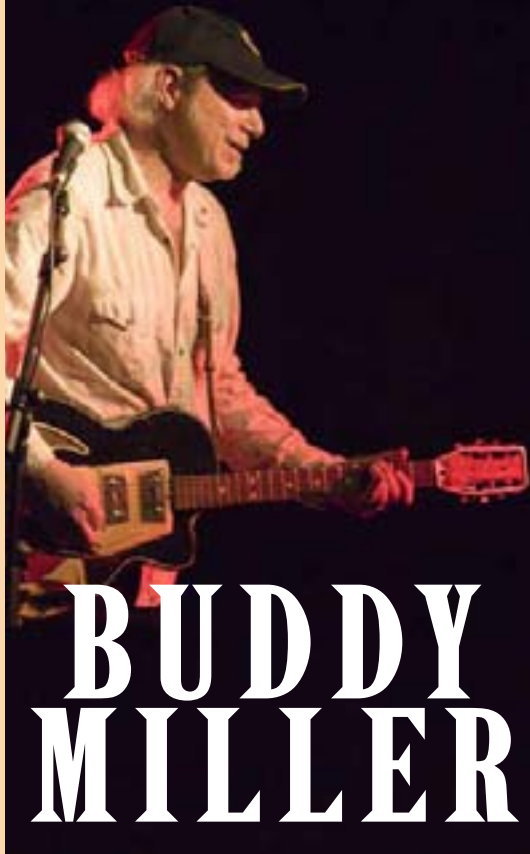
WHEN DID YOU START PLAYING?

I started playing about the time The Beatles came on the scene. I was born in 1952. My sister was into Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, so around that time. The hootenanny folk scene was a starting point. She's the one that had the guitar. So that's when I got into learning basic chords. Actually I joined an elementary school band doing pretty much Beatles and Stones stuff. As a matter of fact the first gig I played we did House Of The Rising Son. Growing up at that time was a great musical education when everything was available on radio. Everyone was trying to be on the cutting edge then. The Beatles were on the cutting edge but they were others that influenced them too. You read an interview with Paul McCartney and he'd say such and such as song was them trying to do Wilson Pickett or Buck Owens or whoever. And I'd listen back and hear that in there.

DO YOU THINK THAT CROSS-FERTILIZATION IS IMPORTANT FOR INSTANCE IF YOU CONSIDER WHAT FAIRPORT CONVENTION DID AFTER THEY LISTENED TO THE BAND AND SET ABOUT DOING THE SAME WITH ENGLISH ROOTS MUSIC?

Yes and Richard Thompson is one of my favourite guitar players. He is such a great player whether its electric or acoustic. The way he adapted jigs and reels, and they are hard to play, like American bluegrass which comes from the same source. But most of the bluegrass players are strictly acoustic. I love his voice too, besides the songwriting and playing. But I sometimes wonder why am I trying to get a deal when he can't even get on a major label these days! (laughs). Not that not having a major label deal means a whole lot now. It's kinda crazy that a guy who most of the guitar players I know would love to be, can't get a major label deal. The thing that I aspire to is not going to make me a lot of money I know, but I still want to do it.

I first saw Buddy Miller playing on a Dublin stage with Jim Lauderdale, when Jim was touring in support of his debut album, as part of a Warner Bros package that included Little Texas and Mark O'Connor. Lauderdale was excellent and as I had little interest in the the others I spent some time talking with him. He briefly introduced me to Buddy but his playing sparked my interest and when Buddy began releasing his solo albums I was already hooked. By the way that illustrious band also included Dusty Wakeman, Gurf Morlix and the late Donald Lindley. No wonder Little Texas didn't mean anything to me. The first two tracks I heard of Buddy's were included on a compilation called *Points West*.



BUDDY MILLER

It included two songs recorded in Buddy's Dogtown Studio, then located in Pasadena, CA. One of those was a wonderful heartbreak song called *The Garage Sale*, a Miller co-write. That album came out in 1990. He was later asked to do a full album for Hightone, but his first album *Your Love And Other Lies* didn't come out till five years later. Buddy's albums have always covered a wide range of music from country and soul to r'n'b and anything that took his fancy. Since then he has released several albums on Hightone. However his latest release is his debut release on New West. *Universal United House Of Prayer* (2004) won the Americana Association's album of the year. His cover of Mark Heard's *Worry Too Much* also received song of the year. Buddy has previously visited Dublin as a member of Emmylou Harris's band Spyboy, where he took over from Daniel Lanois as guitarist and also as a member of Steve Earle's Dukes. As part of those tours he also appeared as an opening act with his wife Julie Miller and with Jim Lauderdale. Miller now lives and works in Nashville and has produced Julie's own albums as well as releasing a eponymous duets album with her in 2001. His first headlining gig, as part of a brief tour, was in a packed and appreciative Whelans. We managed to get the self-effacing Miller to sit down and talk to us prior to the gig.

As a musician your last album seemed to address some personal and wider issues. Does the political climate effect you?

Usually not. I'm not that aware, but I was sort of forced into it under unusual circumstances. It was that and the fact that we had a family tragedy, my wife's brother was killed by lightning. It was in the exact same spot where he'd been struck when he was a boy. So there were things there that I knew that I had to try and figure out. So that happening and what was going on in the world and that fact that I had wanted to do a gospel-styled record, something I'd been thinking about before anything was going on, so when the war started I felt even more that it was the direction to go. That It need a strong spiritual undertone.

You received much acclaim

for your singing and playing skills but you are also a songwriter and producer, are any of these skills more important to you?

Well, I don't think of myself as any of these things. I just love to be doing music. I don't consider myself a producer... but I shouldn't really say that as I'm about to produce Solomon Burke. Which is going to be an amazing thing. But I think of myself so much as a producer, maybe more a facilitator. And my wife I think of more as a songwriter. I work with her and with Jim Lauderdale, those are pretty much the two folks I work with on songs. People that are good, he laughs, that way I can get away with what I do. Guitar playing? I feel I've just been very lucky with all of it. I've been in great situations that I don't know how I've gotten into.

What where your influences as a guitar player when you were growing up?

You know, it's funny, I remember when I was small and I must have just been two or three but I do remember seeing Elvis on tv. I must have been a tiny little kid but I can still remember it now. It's actually the only think I can remember about the house I grew up in. I can see that tv and Elvis on it. It made a strong impact, as did the Beatles. That's what drew me in but where I was and the people around me at that time led me towards folk music and the Beatles stuff at the same time.

When did you meet Jim Lauderdale?

New York was where I met Jim. That was in 1980. I moved from Texas, from Austin with my wife to New York. Jim was one of the first people that I met. At that time a lot of folks were moving from all over... and I don't know why. It's really funny when you think about it as the music scene was so ripe and beautiful with great creative music but we thought let's go to New York as that's where they make records! The Lone Star Cafe was going on then, it was that whole Urban Cowboy thing, so I was thinking, yeah "We'll be a hit there". So we did and I got my van broken into two nights in a row and the guitar I play onstage was actually stolen on me, but I got it back. We learned a lot there. And my friendship with Jim has stayed since those days.

You've talked about doing a duet album, any news on that?
I would love to do one. It's been a matter of scheduling. When we both have a big enough space to do it we will.

You're guitar is an unusual model, where did you find it?
I found it in a pawn shop in Boulder, Colorado in 1977, around about that time. I was on tour and \$50 was a lot of money then to spend but it was listed at \$85, it was unplayed and it looked great so I offered them \$50 and they were very happy with that. I only brought it because of the sparkles but I took it do the gig that night and it sounded pretty good. I have a black one here tonight. I have three of them left. I was able to save up and get five, which was all they had there. They had one more which was way high up and they felt it wasn't worth the effort of getting it down for \$50.

Guitars like that must become very personal, Mike Henderson plays slide on an old Silvertone he got years ago, and I read he doesn't change the strings...

Mike is fearless and can do more on one string than I can do on a whole guitar. I change my strings regularly, the idea of breaking a string on stage is too humiliating. Though I like the sound of old strings.

Are you working on your next album?

I'm starting to, yeah. I'm hoping to have a new one out this year. I'm not sure if it will involve Julie or how it will evolve. I have no idea what it will be at this point but I want to get a record out.

This will be at home in your Dogtown Studio?

It will and I don't remember why we called it that as we had no dogs. We had a bunch of cats. It just sounded good I guess.

How do you decide on what songs you want to cover?

I've always been drawn to songwriters. Even before I was writing myself. I still love great writers. Recently I got to hang out with Donnie Fritts, who's one of my heroes. So I always have a list, in a little notebook, of the songs that I would like to do. Little by little I've been working through them.

Soul music has always been a big influence on your work too?
When I was growing up radio was open and played a lot of different music back to back. It's a shame it's no longer that way. I remember hearing the Beatles followed by Skeeter Davis. That's the way most people's record collections are.

Have you chosen songs for the Solomon Burke project?

So far I've sent him about 60 or 70 songs. I shouldn't talk about it as maybe I'll jinx it and it won't happen. I just think of that incredible voice and he wanted to do a country record. So it should be fun. *(That album Nashville is now released)*

Will you do it at home?

You know, I'll do it at home. I've done a few things that have come to me that have been important, and I've done them in studios but it loses whatever it is that I do.

You don't play too often in Nashville itself at the moment?

It's a great town and I've thought about getting a place and playing every week and trying out new songs but in the end I'd rather play just once a year.

Tonight you have a pick-up band for the tour, does that work well?

I hope so (laughs). It's our first night. I'm used to it a certain way and I want certain feels established but outside of that I'm happy to have things move around. It gives me a little musical kick in the butt which I need. I was going to come over by myself with an acoustic and electric guitar to do solo gigs but a friend of mine suggested these guys, the Amazing Pilots - who were friend of his, and I thought why not. He said they have a van and would be happy to do it so here we are. They're great guys and they have done their homework. I sent them some songs and told them the keys we would do them in.

Will you be working with Emmylou in the future again?

She's touring with Mark (Knopfler) but I'm sure I will. We're best friends and I talk to her every few days when I'm home.

When a project is presented to you, like Solomon Burke, do you have to shift things around in order to fit it in?

Well, other than my own stuff I haven't taken on anything in a few years. I wanted to be able to concentrate on my music and to get Julie to get back into doing stuff. But something like working with Solomon I couldn't turn down, it was just too good of a thing. He's a hero and a legend. He's an amazing person to be around. There have been some other production offers of some wonderful artists that almost happened but I realised that I couldn't do them and my own music. Like Emmylou has been involved with projects in the past but I don't know how she does it. I'm so busy with things and I'm just a little peanut. She constantly has offers, everyone wanting her to sing on their record and to do this and so much and she's a wonderful person.

Do you play at home for your own enjoyment?

I try to make time to. It can be hard to do that but I try to not lose sight of what I love. I love playing every night when I'm out but I have to keep that love for it at home. I just love music a lot. But it gets tougher and tougher to find the time to sit down alone.

The Americana award must have been a great feeling?

That was a real surprise. I felt rather foolish afterwards because I was so unprepared for winning or accepting for Mark Heard's song. He was a good friend and that meant so much to me.

Interview by Steve Rapid, photograph by Ronnie Norton

ELIZA GILKYSON

The Little Dream Lives

Interview by Paul McGee



Contemporary Folk singer/songwriter Eliza Gilkyson has been releasing excellent records since the late 1970's. In fact, she has released 13 superb albums over a 26 year career that has seen her recognised as one of the most honest and insightful artists of our time.

A Hall of Fame member, alongside such luminaries as Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zandt and Nanci Griffith, Eliza was nominated for a Grammy in 2004 with 'Land of Milk & Honey' as Best Contemporary Folk Album. Eliza has also recorded with Swiss composer/harpist Andreas Vollenweider, singing on his 'Eolian Minstrel' release.

The craft of song writing has always been an integral part of Eliza's nature and has been finely honed into beautiful melody and written thoughts that spring from personal experience. A storyteller of great humour and wisdom, Eliza has recently been accused of anti-American sentiment in the honesty of her song writing on recent releases 'Land of Milk & Honey' and 'Paradise Hotel.' It is impossible to listen to tracks such as 'Man of God' and 'Jedidiah 1777' and not be moved by the deep emotion and conviction of the songs.

The daughter of songwriter Terry Gilkyson who wrote the hits, 'Greenfields', 'Marianne', 'Memories are made of This' and 'The Bare Necessities' (from Jungle Book), Eliza has lived the life of a musician across both American and Europe. Her brother, Tony, a long-time member of the band X, has played on her records and Rosanne Cash has covered her songs. Eliza has also shared the microphone with Bonnie Raitt, Shawn Colvin, Mary Chapin-Carpenter, Iris DeMent & Patty Griffin to name but a few artists who have honoured her song writing abilities.

Currently touring to promote her latest release, Paradise Hotel — Eliza Gilkyson is an essential listening experience for any discerning music fan.

Congratulations on the release of 'Paradise Hotel'. Have you been happy with the reaction it has received from critics and fans alike?

Yes. It has been the best reaction yet to one of my records. A lot of people loved 'Milk & Honey' and I think that the fans were a little nervous that I was putting out another record so soon. Paradise Hotel builds on what was said on Milk & Honey; which was a statement of what was happening with the affairs of the world. Paradise Hotel brings it a little closer to the personal.

How autobiographical do you make the song content?

It is hard not to start from a personal perspective. Whether it is just narcissism or a diva quality in me, I don't know (laughs). I

do believe that it is important to find things about the personal experience that are relatable to other people.

Is that therapeutic or does it give you a sense of vulnerability? I think it is a little of both. I try to leave some interpretation up to the listener. It is important to proffer just enough information and to let the listener fill in the blanks from their own personal experiences. In this way, you engage the listener.

The early records were more rooted in & around the dynamic of relationships. Is it fair to say that your political sensitivities have only come to the fore on the last 4 releases?

There has been a real evolution over the last 4 records. I remember the song 'Riverside' from the Lost & Found record and thinking to myself that there was a lifting of my head from my own miasma. I was getting to a point in my life where I was less affected by the personal ups & downs of relationships. I think that I had reached a maturity where I was becoming aware of my own mortality. With children and family growing up you ask the question "what kind of world do I want them to inherit".

There is a strong cycle running through the last few releases where there are themes in the songs. A sense of spirituality that offers a prayer for the universe and all it has endured? I appreciate so much what you have said. That is the heart of the matter for me. I am thinking of making my next record a collection of those very songs plus some new ones. I want to call it 'Secular Hymns'. That is the crux. It has come from my political & personal concerns having met and I have reached a point where my concerns have made me cross paths. It came from my desire to act in the world meeting with my spiritual path. The personal quest for self-knowledge that I was on, where the political and the personal can cross paths. I think that there is a lot of cross-pollination between people happening in the World right now.

I was listening to the song 'Beauty Way' from your Hard Times in Babylon record released in 2000. The line "we are coming upon a time in our lives, when the little dream lives but the big dream dies", is such an insightful message. How has its meaning endured for you into 2006?

I think much more so than when I wrote it. It comes from a huge shift of focus for me in that people can hit a mid-life crisis where there is a sudden realisation that the things you thought were going to happen in life, are just not going to occur. I know this is especially true in America where people have this sense of, almost, entitlement. I call it the betrayal of the golden promise. . . People can become bitter and disenchant when their expectations do not happen. However, you can really start to live from this point

if you realise that all you have around you is really perfect in a way and full of surprises. The little dream is more interesting and exciting. It is more real & the little things in your life become everything. Your family, grandchildren, relationships and the wisdom of the experiences you have had are of far more value than comparing them with some life you think you should have had.

You come from a strong tradition of music within your family. Is this an inherent pressure or does it sit lightly on your shoulders? Well that was probably one of the big dreams that I gave up on. I reached a point in my life where I realised that I was never going to 'smoke' my Dad (laughs)...! He was such a magical songwriter and had the ability to know what would appeal to a mass audience in terms of relatable melodies and themes. I like to think that I inherited his feeling for melody & a sense of having a visceral relationship with the songs. However, I am happy to pass the international Orb & Sceptre to him.

I can sense your father in a number of your songs, such as 'Easy Rider'? Is this an accurate observation?

He is in a number of my songs and 'Easy Rider' is very much about the relationship of a father to a child. It can also be true of many people's experience of relationships with their father. When I say 'Everybody tried to love you but they couldn't get indicative of the way many people love their fathers from afar. In the end his goodness won out over any of his personal demons and I talk about 'the devil drove my father but the Lord got Daddy'. Many people come up to me and say that the song moved them and it was their story. In other songs, it is enough to keep the song meaning vague and let the listener interpret the meaning for themselves.

Does the writing process come easy for you?

No. However I know enough now to realise when I have struck gold. I spend a lot of time on the hunt, scaring up prey & if I am on it, then I know I'm going to get it. I know that if I have the basics then I can craft the idea into something that works. There can be a lot of chasing my muse but once I'm on it I have more confidence now that I can deliver something of value.

On this acoustic tour you are playing songs from your back-catalogue. How does it stand the test of time when you revisit it?

I am very proud of most of the work. The best songs stand up pretty well against my recent songs but in some cases, when I listen back, the production was of its time. Playing them again gives me the chance to breathe new life into the songs and interpret them in a different way.

You have released a CD of old songs called 'Retrospecto' and is this a way of dusting off old recordings and looking at them with fresh eyes?

A lot of people have picked up on me only since I signed to Red House records some 4 years ago. This look back is a chance for them to hear what I was doing over previous years and to hear certain styles that evolved and others that were left behind. There is some new-age stuff when I was trying on different philosophies and beliefs. They are steps I took, some faulty and some were jettisoned along the way. This release is really for the fans who know me already & my hope is to continue to do this into the future

How pivotal in your career has been the Red House record deal? It took a lot of pressure off me. At the time, I had resigned myself to not getting another record deal. I was either too old or they just did not get what I was doing in the major record labels. I was in the process of putting out the records by myself but Bob Feldman (Red House President & Founder) contacted me & said that I would always have a home with them. He signed me without ever hearing me play live and he continued to back me in all that I did. I got 100% freedom to select my songs and the players that I wanted. It was very rewarding and Bob would also make suggestions on things that I should change. Many times his musical instincts were correct and his ideas were something I could go with. Also, it is very difficult to co-ordinate the release of a record and deal with the press & book a tour. It can be a daunting factor and not so easy to synchronise. It takes an incredible amount of energy and knowledge.

I was going to make that point about your long-time producer, Mark Hallman. He has given you much support over the years in terms of the sound of the records.

Mark has been working with me for many years now and we have developed a trust over this time. I am usually very possessive about wanting to do everything my own way and a person who likes to be in control and very hands-on. So, it has been a gradual process of giving the creative control away. We have developed a special relationship over the years and I often wonder why artists feel the need to change producers. Perhaps they want a different colour to the sound but I prefer to stay with someone I trust.

The song 'Man Of God' has caused much controversy in America with its political content and message. How have you seen the song accepted?

Well I guess that 'Highway 9' from the 'Milk & Honey' record paved the way & it was out at the time we first went to war in Iraq. People were being treated as if they didn't love their country if they didn't agree with all that the Government was doing out there. They felt uncomfortable, singled out and isolated. There was a pressure on all of us who didn't agree. However, in time people started getting that song and I gained confidence to go one step further with 'Man Of God'. When I first performed it, I could sense people were in disbelief that I was saying this. There would be silences from the audience and I was unsure as to where I stood. But I misunderstood the intensity of what they were feeling. Instead of them squirming or walking out, they stood up and freaked out at the end of the song which was very encouraging.

I think the next song on 'Paradise Hotel' works really well against Man Of God in that 'Jedidiah 1777' portrays an innocent, looking for the greater good out of war.

I think that the two songs go well together. They are the different views of the so-called warrior and the real warrior. Even in Jedidiah you can see the seeds of Capitalism being sown among our early patriots. The words are from the letters of an ancestor of mine Captain Jedidiah Huntington who wanted to return from war and become a merchant.

Your song 'The Ballad of Yvonne Johnson' (from Milk & Honey) is shocking in its truth. Again, you are looking at the minority classes and telling their story.

Yes. That is all her own story and she is a woman with a lot to offer. There is a 15-Year review on all life sentences in Canada and she comes up for consideration shortly. She is due to be granted certain privileges and could well walk out in the world again. The prayer at the end of the song is all hers and she deserved the song writing credit on the record.

Are you worried by the media control that seems to be gripping the U.S.A. today? It reminds me of the 1950's McCarthy era all over again with this no blame culture.

Yes, I am very worried, as it seems to have crossed all party lines now. To be a Liberal is now to be seen as a radical and people are not confronting the deeper issues any more. We seem to have lost sight of what is best for everyone in our complacency. We now call Imperialism by the word Democracy right now and it is a sham. We have an unpopular president but the Democrats do not seem to have any alternative to offer. I guess we will just have to wait and see what happens.

Does Music still have a role to play in this world – despite all the cynicism?

Yes. I think because of all the cynicism. That word can be one of our biggest enemies. It can be a bitterness that arises out of defeat as we talked about earlier. I'm trying to look at who is suffering and is this the result of all that we have been given? The connection between all that you do and the results they bring cannot be ignored. Living on the edge can be an exciting and a dangerous place but most people would buy their way out of ever having to be there.

Eliza Gilkyson is a special talent within the music industry, a person of huge integrity and a songwriter of rare insight and real emotion.



jace Everett

talking
to
real
people

I would depend though on the acceptance that radio, back home, would give him. For a new artist it is all important and Everett plays music that has some edge to it and which makes it that much harder to break through in an environment, at radio, that is increasingly bland. Then when your label head is replaced you are left in a wait and see situation. Something that has happened since his return to the States and the amalgamation of the Sony and BMG labels in Nashville which has seen his mentor John Grady depart the label. Everett played here in Dublin as part of a New from Nashville promotional initiative with Dierks Bentley and we spoke to him in Whelans prior to a well-received gig.

Alongside the country greats like Waylon Jennings you also grew up listening to rock, who were you're influenced there?

I was a bass player so I'd been playing bass since I was fifteen. *Bitches Brew* by Miles Davis is one of my favourite records. There's not much I don't like. I'm a huge fan of Beethoven and Brahms. I have sung classical repertoire, That's how I went to college - on an academic scholarship. This was before the cigarettes and the Jamesons took over. Elvis was a huge thing in my house. When I was seven years old I loved the movie *Grease*. In the States there is such delinination, "this is not country, or that's not country" They try to figure out which bin to put you in. That just bores me senseless. To me there are just two kinds of music - The good and the bad, or more realistically it's down to what I like and what I don't like. U2 are my favourite rock band and I love the Clash. I reference Waylon, not because I sound like him - 'cuz I don't. But rather it's the attitude and the swagger is really more what I'm talking about. It's the whole concept of doing what you do and damn the consequences.

So when did you decide that the country road was the one to travel.

I never actually made that decision. It has kind of been applied on me. I came to Nashville in 2001, after a divorce, pretty screwed up in the head. I was trying to find my way. I was playing bass and doing backing vocals for a guy who was shopping a deal, and someone at MCA saw me and he took me aside and asked me what I was doing. I played him a couple of songs I'd written and he said "that's great, why don't you cut some sides for me". I did, and I never really showcased for a deal, it just sort of fell in my lap. On my record there are tracks that lean towards rock, other songs are straight jump blues, there stuff that's rockabilly ands there's Texas style country. My sound is my voice, the musical backing tends to be fluid.

The music has echos of other acts in there...

Yeah there's a lot of different things. Radney Foster is a guy who is a big influence who I take things from. I paid him back though by cutting one of his songs (laughs). He does stuff that's Dwight Yoakam-ish to straight California rock. Like wise the only continuing thread is the timbre of his voice.

Do you think the industry is more accepting of that diversity at this time?

The industry is so reactionary, They tend to accept those things that sell a lot of records, whatever the hell that is, they jump on board with it. Shania Twain couldn't get arrested on Music Row until Mutt Lange came into her life. They all of a sudden it was " oh that's country". But it just her and you either like it or you don't, I actually think she's made some cool records, so good on her. Radio will only accept a certain kind of thing in the States that serves their needs, understandably. The labels do the same thing. So the onus is on the artist and on the public. The public has to aggressively want to hear something fresh if they expect to get it. Otherwise they are going to be spoonfed the same crap ad nauseum, as long as the label are making money and radio's making money that's the way it's going to go.

But it is very difficult to get someone to listen to a genre that they perceive they don't like...

The thing with country, and I'll probably get in trouble with my record company over this, is that they manufacture an act so that there not much difference between Britney Spears and many of the Nashville acts. It's someone who looks cute and who can maybe sing a little bit and they're willing to play the game and they get spoonfed songs and they don't rock the boat. Then you get idiots like me that start rocking the boat before they are even half way on it. So some times we get wet, but that's the consequences, you got to do what you do.

Will radio open up to a more diverse artist such as yourself?

I don't really know, radio's been pretty good to me, but the nature of radio now means that their playlists are so small and there so many new artists that their back is kind of against the wall too. I'm doing really well at XM and Sirius where they have a broader playlist as against the commercial stations who have a playlist of 15 to 20 current records that they play. The way it works is that you would hear a new Dierks Bentley song then you'll hear a George Jones song from 1987 that they'll play 20 times a week, every week. So it's a really difficult format to break an act in. So that why it's such a big deal what Dierks has done, and what Gretchen Wilson's done and that Miranda Lambert seems about to do. Thankfully I'm with a label where the head,

John Grady, really does believe in artists and people that write songs and then sing them. He's not into fabricated bullshit. He stands by people like me. People like Trent Willmon, a good buddy of mine, who didn't have a big hit at radio but who is a real valid artist. He's prepared to give people second and third chances.

So is touring the main way you can connect with an audience?

Yes, and that's part of the reason why we're here. I lived in Europe for a time so I have a real affinity for even just being here. I love Europe. So hopefully Nashville and CMA realize that we need this market and that this market needs us to come over and tour. It seems like chaos but when you look back in six months time you can see that we got this because we did that. I played the Tonight Show a couple of weeks ago and I'm an AOL breaker artist so I got my band up there doing a session thing. We're also iTunes single of the week - first country artist to get that - it doesn't make a big impact at commercial radio yet but the culmination of these various things all helps so if I don't give them a dark rockabilly cut next time out they might get more involved with me. Because I'm a little bit left of centre we're trying to do things a little differently, we're trying to have some fun with the way we're doing it.

Joe Ely touring with the Clash was an example of how things can cross over and open up an audience to something new for both parties...

What they noticed with Waylon Jennings and U2 as well as bands like The Clash and Joe Ely was that there was a truth to what they were doing. What I'm doing may be a little louder, a little twangier but there is an honesty to it. That's what's really good and what country music is supposed to be about. Real people talking about real things in their lives.

There are elements of testosterone and testament in your music...

Yeah, it's a little bit of sin and a little bit of redemption. That yin and yang balance is really important.

How will you change things for the next album?

I'm hoping that there is a little more cohesion from a sonic standpoint but from a lyrical standpoint it's going to be all over the map. I will need to have a couple of boy meets girl cute songs to send to radio, which will be good songs but I also want to tackle a couple of things that don't normally get tackled in country. Though that may be the death knell of whatever career I have but I figure I have a nine year old son and I'm 33 years old, I've got a beautiful new wife and I have a great life which is too short to fuck around. I need to say my piece.

Is your wife still playing bass with you?

Yeah, and my son, who lives in the South of France now with

his mother, he came to meet us and we spent four days here in Dublin. We had a ball but I sent him back to France and her to Nashville yesterday, so that was a bit of a blue day for me. My wife didn't play bass when I met her but I handed her my old rig and said "You know what? You play acoustic. Try this" and God bless her if she didn't spend six hours a day after that learning and now she's playing her ass off. She did the Tonight Show and the AOL session. Her first gig with me was in front of John Grady, the president of the label. She did great.

What kind of gigs are you doing in the States?

The truth of the matter is we have been doing predominantly radio orientated shows, we've been doing a lot of acoustic shows and we've also done some full band shows with Miranda Lambert and with John Michael Montgomery, Buddy Jewel, Chely Wright and others as well as some small club gigs on my own. Without airplay it's really difficult to get more than 2 or 3000 dollars. And when you have four mouths to feed as well as a bus driver and road manager it's not easy. You're not big yet but have gone beyond the \$50 a man things, it's a no-man's-land situation.

How about In Europe?

When I played bass over here it was for a guy who didn't make it. But one of the requirements was to have a wireless unit so you could really move about, get up on the bar whatever. It was fun. But with some country acts the show is really boring now. Over here in Europe you pay attention and like a show, the numbers are smaller but they count more. But if I come over more often I'm closer to Jacques, my son, and to Jamesons, two of my favourite things.

What are your future plans and prospects since you have been dropped from Sony after John Grady's dismissal?

I thought about moving to Ireland and getting a job at the Jamesons distillery! Or maybe I could be a U2 roadie?

Seriously, I haven't been all that affected. The label wasn't really doing much to promote my record. I had little or no presence at radio, which seems to be the only barometer of success that matters to a Nashville major label. This gives me the opportunity to get another shot at another label and hopefully not repeat some of my own missteps namely: relinquishing too much of my creative control to a slick producer.

In the interim, since my song *Your Man* (sung by Josh Turner) went #1, I've had a lot of good action on my songs. Artists like Keith Urban, Gary Allan, Rascal Flatts, and Brooks and Dunn have been holding some of my songs of late. Therefore, I don't have to get back to truck driving just yet. Which is nice!

Interview by Steve Rapid. Photograph by Ronnie Norton



dierks bentley

thoughts of a modern day drifter

Dierks Bentley has achieved a lot as an artist he has been able, from the position of major label artist to stay true to his vision of his music. He has had success at radio and has sold significant amounts of albums in the process. All of which gives him a stronger platform from which to develop his mix of hard country, rock and bluegrass. Hopefully he will see Europe as a place that openly accepts his vision and that he will return on a reasonably regular basis. He brought his full band to what was for them a very small and intimate gig at Whelans and we had the opportunity to have a quick chat before the gig.

The last few years have been such a whirlwind that I haven't had the time to do a lot of things I did some co-writing with Rodney Crowell and he's a guy who I would really like to develop a writing relationship with. I will this year, but 2004 the bus was on the road 318 days. So when I was working on writing this *Modern Day Drifter* I was working with the guys who I'm real comfortable writing with, but I didn't have the time to experiment on stuff. I also want to write with Jim Lauderdale... he's an incredible writer.

In 2006 what does Country Music mean to you?

In the States the term Country Music is so broad, such a wide open genre. We spend most of our time just doing our own thing and we play a lot of rock bars, to a lot of punk kids and the younger crowd. For us it's about taking the older stuff, which we love - Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard, Buck Owens and Faron Young, Lefty Frizzell, lots of guys from the '50's and '60's, and try to add something that's new and fresh. Make a little more contemporary through songwriting, with the melodies but keeping it attached to the music that we love. In the industry of Country overall I think it's a good time. After Garth there was a lot of stuff that came in in his wake and then the industry

went through some hard times. It's come out of that a little leaner and a little meaner. Acts like Gretchen Wilson, people who write their own stuff. That made for some stuff that was better for the fans and more commercial, but with a little more thought going into it.

Growing up when did you connect with this music more than any other form?

My Dad loved country music. Growing up in Phoenix, Arizona there was some country stations that he always listened to. He love Hank Williams, George Strait and Randy Travis. It was there, it was Dad's music. But when I was thirteen I met a friend who played the electric guitar and it totally changed and it was like "Wow you can play. You can actually be a part of this". He was into a lot of rock music - Van Halen and Metallica all that stuff. The electric guitar meant distortion pedals and turning the gain up and power chords and stuff. So from thirteen to seventeen I listened to a lot of rock music. Then when I turned seventeen I discovered Hank Jr, a song called Man to Man and that blew my mind. So I got really into Hank Jr. I was never a very good guitar player so I was happy to get rid of the electric and to start playing the acoustic. Hank Jr then led to Waylon and Willie and they led me back to Bob Wills, and I never really got beyond that stuff. I moved to Nashville then two years later. But in 1994 I didn't really feel at home there but luckily I walked into this place called the Station Inn and discovered bluegrass music. That started everything all over again for me. It started with a real foundation and everything built up from there.

Songwriters like Jim Lauderdale started in bluegrass and came back to it later. I didn't know what bluegrass music was, I thought it was Roy Clark playing banjo on Hee Haw. I thought that it was old people's music. I walked in there and saw a bunch of guys enjoying themselves. No one wearing

a cowboy hat, no star shirts but they knew more about country music than anyone on Music Row. Bluegrass and country come from the same period, Bill Monroe in the 40's, and Flatt and Scruggs. It was pretty similar to country back then but of course they went separate ways. I started again all over, I got a Martin guitar and concentrated on playing bluegrass. Eventually I got a band together and we played every weekend someplace or other. 100 bucks a man for a wedding, a barbecue, a tailgate party, anything. Wallpaper music where people don't even see that you're there sometimes. That eventually led me back into country music. I mean we were always playing country songs in that bluegrass style anyway. My first love was country and I loved the personalities involved. The guys whose lives were bigger than their voices.

You spent a lot of time at the Station Inn.

Oh yeah. One of the first people I met there was Jason Carter of the Del McCoury Band and he and I became best friends. He taught me so much about the music, making me mix tapes and everything. I eventually became good friends with all the guys in that band. The very first record I put out was in 1999, an independent record. I also loved this guy called Jamie Hartford, his band's country rock and blues. I brought them together along with guitarist Ray Flacke and John Hughey, Conway Twitty's steel player, so I made this really cool record with all these guys. From that I got my regular record deal. But I always wanted to have the Del McCoury Band on my records. It makes me look cool. And hopefully it also introduces some bluegrass music to some fans.

My show is steel and electric guitar, it's loud but we can break it down and we do some Hank Sr and some Johnny Cash. We honky-tonk it up but it starts off pretty loud. At a live show I like to feel the energy. On the bigger shows we can break it down to upright bass and banjo, mandolin and snare drum and do a stripped down segment. It goes from very loud and electric to being more acoustic and bluegrass. I'm just out there doing what I want to do for me. I'm hoping people like it but first and foremost I make the music for me. I have a steel player called Tim Sargent with me now, who used to play with Ricky Skaggs, he's from Kentucky and is also a great fiddle and dobro player. He's a great addition to the band as we're able to do some more acoustic stuff with him.

We talked about the personalities of country and the style and how the rock attitude of someone like Dwight Yoakam, mixed with the rhinestones made a perfect alternative to rock back in the mid-eighties.

Dwight Yoakam is amazing, I did a radio show, a guitar pull, sitting in a line everyone playing a song. I was on my own but Dwight had a couple of guys with him. He was there with the hat pulled down just so low, and a great shirt with snaps with a jean jacket, and the tightest jeans. I thought this guys making the rest of us look so undressed up. He's so cool. He's a true star. One of the greats.

Is that star quality something you are looking for?

After a lot of years in Nashville, playing a lot of cover for drunks you're not putting on a show. So when you get out there, you have to learn to use the stage and to be a performer. It's about connecting with the crowd. I'm a big fan of U2 and I watch how he moves. Before a show I'll often watch one of the DVD's for five minuets or so and I'll get pumped up. I'm always trying to reach out to the crowd. I'm still learning. When you get back to a place like this (Whelans) it's more about the songs. And there's nowhere to hide on a stage like this.

I want to be able to come over here and have a following and to be able to play. And when I do press or radio over here everyone seems much more into the music. You can start talking about players and they know who you're talking about which they don't back in the States. And as a person it's great to see other places and cultures and to meet people.

Although it's my name out there and I've been through the whole band thing I treat my guys like a band. I don't try to copy the records. I like to move it around. Back in the States country music can be boring, they make a record and then they have an artist who's so detached from the band, and the guys have learned their parts off the records and it gets stale. If there are more than six people it becomes an orchestra and not a band. We like to take the record and do what's best with it live. We use different arrangements and we can let go.

Dierks Bentley's third album Long Trip Alone is released in the US on October 17th.

PATRICIA VONNE

crossing many borders

Patricia Vonne grew up listening to the Spanish folk songs sung by her mother and Saturday matinees at San Antonio's Olmos Theater watching classic movies and MGM musicals became the foundation of her aesthetic. Her first live concert though was at a gig by Reno and his band The Sax Maniacs which led to performers such as Joe Ely, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Los Angeles-based Chicano rockers The Cruzados.

Vonne then honed her talents in New York City singing back-up and playing bass in the band Mick & The Maelstroms. She then began writing her own songs after meeting her creative partner and husband Robert LaRoche. After developing their Tex-Mex musical brew in New York City they moved to Austin in 2001 to bring her music back home to Texas.

We had the opportunity to speak to her after her first visit to Ireland.

"My earliest memories were of my mother singing to me and my brothers and sisters and having us sing with her, mariachi and Mexican folk songs. And my dad was a drummer. So there was always music in the house and it was encouraged. Our mother would take us along to see those old MGM musicals with their high powered dance sequences. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Rogers and Hammerstein. You can't get any better than that for an education at a young age (laughs).

So later on when I moved to New York I joined a band and then started my own in 1998. Then once I moved to Austin in 2000 and my first album came out a couple of years later and that's when things started rolling. We found contacts through South By South West for our US and UK labels. We've now been to Europe seven times in almost three years".

Did you feel that the then-Americana scene was a good mix with your Mexican-American roots, in the way that Rosie Flores and Tish Hinajosa did?

I didn't realize till later that Tish and I are from the same hometown and Rosie is now a dear friend of mine. But I grew up with the limited record collection of my two older brothers. That included The Cruzados - a Mexican rock band - and my mother's favourite singers. They all wrote their own music. But they weren't played a lot on the radio, it was pop and top forty stuff mainly. So I relied on what my brothers had which was Joe Ely, Stevie Ray Vaughn, some Tom Petty. But the Cruzados really made a mark. They later went on to score the films of my brother - Desperado and From Dusk Till Dawn. So they were a huge influence on my brother Robert. They're now known as Tito and The Tarantulas. So I started writing music and I wrote a song for their lead singer called El Cruzado and he invited me on tour with his band as a member of Tito

and The Tarantulas. That was the first time I came to Europe as a musician and that's when I decided to get my band over as it was incredible. They treat you well, they feed you and they put us up in a hotel. The audiences had such a reverence for the music. It was an education and a way to see the world.

When I started to write I wondered did I just want to write country music or rock n' roll and I decided to add that southern rock/south of the border flavour, which I love. I love the desert sound. Once my husband joined the band I told him that this was going to be all that, not just one style. I wasn't thinking of making records but doing it to feed my soul. I really like what's coming out - the Joe Ely song, Joe's Gone Riding. The Alejandro Escovedo song, which I wrote for him, Guitars and Castanets. I also collaborated with Robert on some Spanish songs for my Grandmother. I know when it's a good song, for me, if I don't get tired of singing it.

Will you go for a bigger sound on the next album?

Well I have been able to open for people like Raul Malo, who writes in Spanish, Ruben Blades - he played my uncle in Once Upon A Time In Mexico. I have those contacts so at some point I would love to co-write or do a duet with them. So on the next album you may hear some collaborations with people like that. Our label is waiting for the next album as they have spent the budget they had for Guitars and Castanets. So when the possibility came up to play Dublin I flew everyone in on my expense. I'd always wanted to come. I didn't want to come half-baked. You only live once. Who knows when can come back again?

When will you start on the new album?

We have a bunch of songs and we have to write a few more and then pick and choose and see if there is a theme that squeezes out of them. The last album just came together so beautifully. We had the songs, we had Joe, we had Texas. We also had the Spanish songs I'd written when I was with my sister in Spain. So when we collected them together the theme was there. So when I did the photo shoot I was standing in front of the Alamo. I mean I'm a San Antonio girl, I didn't plan it it just happened that way. It fell into place so beautifully. The title Guitars and Castanets that was the theme. I don't know if I can duplicate that on a third, but I'm going to try (laughs).

Will you use a new producer?

We found an amazing producer. We worked together the first time for Once Upon A Time In Mexico. His name is Carl Tio. He's from Mexico and lives in Austin so he has that Spanish sensitivity. He's just an amazing producer. I call him my Sir George Martin. It was so effortless. He also works a lot with my brother.

The major labels can insist that when you do an album that you use outside writers and they put all your songs aside. They say that they don't hear a hit. How can they dare to say that? They can't write a song. That the greatest thing about an indie label like I'm on. They're waiting for the third album. And it's terrific that they give us that freedom.

Have you ruled out working with a major?

I would be open to it. If it was right I have a great lawyer Gabriele, a tough Italian from Brooklyn. So if the right offer came along... she always puts in the right clauses. So if they mess up I'm out of there. Free woman (laughs). It has to work for the artist not the label. They have to let the artist go, as sometimes an album is ready to go but it ends up sitting on a shelf for years. They can't touch their own songs. If they do the right clauses it really helps. It's a tricky business but if you have the right representation it can work.

Did you ever consider going the Nashville route?

No, not really and only because it never came up. When I was living in New York I did go to the major labels and from the start they wanted to reconfigure it. They wanted to lose the band, lose the songs. They said that they'd make me into a "Mexican Celine Dion". Wear a dress and heels (laughs). I'm a roots rock chick from San Antonio. This is with no guarantee, so where would you be then.

What kind of venues do you tour in the States?

We do clubs and festivals, or as an opening act for someone like Joe (Ely). We mainly play around Texas with some East Coast and West Coast. It so vast out there and it can get really expensive to tour, even in Texas. You have to be choosy.

How do you fit the movie offers in with the music?

Well I keep so busy with the music... I just had an offer from an independent company to pick up our song Rebel Bride for a movie in America and they might want some songs and there may be an acting role in it. It has to be the right project in the right context. It has to be something that I really want to do.

The visual aspect of your work is important to you...

Yeah, that goes back again to my mother taking us to those movies. She would always tell us the back stories on the movies. We had an understanding of who wrote the songs, the actors. We got the whole education. I always start the songs with a title. Then it seems to write itself.

We got a strong work ethic from my Dad who was a travelling salesman and was gone six days out of the week. My Mom worked the graveyard shift as a registered nurse to be home when we got home from school. We had to rely on each other a lot. There wasn't a lot of money around. So we stayed home a lot. Robert was making movies and we were his actors, (laughs) It was so much fun, we didn't want to be anywhere else. Every two years there would be a baby and he would make a movie of that... coming home from the hospital, then at a few months old, then three years later. He had the evolution of that child. We each had our own video.

Is video important for your songs?

Yes, Robert shot the debut video. He also did Sax Maniac now though he's so busy my younger brother Marcel, who works with him is so like Robert. He shot Texas Burning and Lationa on the same day on the same set. It was just him, me and my husband. And my husband was the grip and then he'd get in the video playing guitar.

So there has to be a DVD in there?

Yes, we're working on a live DVD with European and Japanese footage.

Our manager came along and he video taped the live shows and in Lithuania, where we played festivals. We're going to put the live footage and the videos on there.

How do you find the attitude to you in Europe these days given that many may disagree with American Foreign policy?

When we first started coming over we felt a little nervous especially when you see what happened to the Dixie Chicks. Freedom of speech seems harder, she just implied that she didn't agree with his policy. Can't we even say that? History will reveal itself. It sad because people are losing their lives. Bush is swimming with the sharks now.

Interview by Steve Rapid/Photography by Ronnie Norton



Though she was born in Houston in 1975 Tift Merritt grew up in North Carolina where she became part of that state's active alt-country scene. She appeared on with the band The Two Dollar Pistols a semi-regular basis, singing duets with lead singer John Howie and playing rhythm guitar and in 1999 recorded and released a seven-song EP of classic country covers with them.

At that time she was also writing her own material and formed her own band The Carabines. A aborted deal with Sugar Hill in 2000 was followed two years later by her signing to Lost Highway. She had won the Chris Austin Songwriting Contest at the annual 2000 Merlefest Music Festival and that brought her to the attention of Ryan Adams who recommended her to his manager Frank Callari who when he joined Lost Highway as an A&R executive signed her to the label. The debut album *Bramble Rose* was released in 2002 and that was followed in 2004 by *Tambourine*, which took on a more soulful direction under the guidance of producer George Drakoulis. There is also a live album, *Home Is Loud*, available at gigs and from her website.



M E R R I T T

You're still in the process of touring *Tambourine*, but have you had time to prepare material for your next album?

I did, I took some time off this summer in the UK and Scandinavia. And I also went to France for what was to have been a week or two but I ended up sitting down at the piano to write and stayed for a couple of months. I wrote most of the new record there but (laughs) I am hoping to get a little time off before I walk into the studio. It's cooking for sure. We may go in in February but if not we will go in in the Spring to record it. Some people can write on the road but I try to give everything for the performance so I don't tend to write when I'm doing that, because they both draw from the same intensity and the things I write on the road are more throwaway. When I write at the piano it's a different feeling to the guitar so it may be how the soul stuff gets in. I play in this simple style and the piano is where I'm at home with my writing. At the moment I draw a lot on the energy and bigness of hitting the keys as opposed to something folkier on the guitar.

Will you work with George Drakoulis again for the next album?

Yeah, I'd love to work with George. I don't think that we've wrung that rag dry. He's so much fun and he has great taste. Even on the road I'm evolving what I'm thinking, what I'm writing. So I feel that my walking in with a different frame of reference will be enough to have things evolve.

Is recording a layered process?

Ethan, George and I all feel that as much as can be done live and real is really the way to go. The piece by piece, Pro-Tools way doesn't seem to add up for me. It seems to be best to do everything in real time. I'm sure that there are other ways of making music but that's the way I prefer to work.

Will you continue to explore the soul/country path or have you other directions planned?

Well you will always inevitably be exploring new territory. But whatever I say will probably be proven wrong as to what actually happens. It will I'm sure the soul/rootsy Carole Kingish muse.

I'm really comfortable writing on the piano, so that where a lot of what I'm doing is coming from and when you put a really cool soul rhythm section with it it goes that direction.

Does what happening in the world around you have a direct influence on your writing?

Absolutely. Especially when I was in France and got to spend a good amount of time away from home. I tend to be someone, who, whatever I would say and feel politically would come from a personal experience. But I feel now more than ever that people of independent mind and independent spirit say something real because everything is just thrown at us in such a commercial way. Even politics and war. I think that an artist needs to bring things into focus. Like the reaction to the Dixie Chicks was because radio in America is so corporate, but that's fine for me as I'm not on the radio so I can say what I want. (laughs). I'm not a huge rebel or anything but as I'm not an identifiable genre. Even in Nashville where a mainstream artist is supposed to be upfront the writer is usually someone else. So I'm more interested in being the writer than being in the spotlight. I also don't write with anyone else and whether that's immaturity or stubbornness I'm not sure but I hate co-writing. I think writing is the most private thing that I do. I feel that I want to be really selfish with it. I have a bad attitude to it because at some point I was told I didn't know how to write a hit. However I did co-write with Gary Louris of The Jayhawks, and that was fun.

Do you start with the words?

Well I always have something, a line or a phrase, something to hold on to. I always wrote and wanted to be a serious Irish poet (laughs). But the words come easier than the music so I have to be careful to marry them together. I have some lyrics that I need off-the-road time to go through them to see if they're any good.

Did you feel that some of your earlier fans weren't as happy with the new direction?

I would say that there was pressure on me to a degree but I'm lucky that I'm with a record label that gives me freedom to do whatever I want to do.

Now nobody in Ireland has ever seen me live, before this, but the band has always covered a big spectrum. From quiet ballads to the part of the show that takes everything to a frenetic free place. I wanted to make sure that we got that energy on a studio recording which is harder to capture than you think it is. After being on the road I decided what I wanted to do was to do my thing and make a really sincere genuine record, but to make that sincerity loud and not introspective.

What's your touring mode here?

I play guitar and keyboards and go back and forth between the two. But this time, unfortunately, I only have my guitar player (Brad Rice) with me. We try to mix it up though and keep it interesting. The tour manager now is Zeke and he's also the drummer, he and I met when we were in college. I was living on the coast in North Carolina and I played in some bands there but when I went to college I met Zeke and he knew a lot of people, like Ryan Adams, we knew Caitlin (Cary) and the folks in the Two Dollar Pistols, Thad Cockrell. It was a really neat scene there. Chapel Hill was enough of a college town, with Indie hipness and not that LA "I must get a record deal" thing going on. So we just and played and felt that we'll get there when we get there.

The first single you released Juke Joint Girl was that prior to working with thenTwo Dollar Pistols?

It was all about the same time. We did that 7" on Oil Rig Recording but nowadays that name sounds horrible because the oil industry is taking over the world. But it was for my grandfather who was a wildcat in Texas and he was a independent guy. So it was named in honour of him not a some big oil corporation (laughs). We were putting our band together and were opening a lot of shows for the Pistols. I didn't think that we were ready then to make the record that I wanted to make, so it made sense to do the duets EP.

Was country music something that you grew up with?

I just grew up around music. I know its easy to think of North Carolina as a Bud Lite country capitol but my Dad had a lot of Dylan, Arتها as well as Dolly Parton and a lot of soul records too. He was also a folky so I learned to fingerpick first. I wasn't very good at it though. So that's how I came into it, which was not by the radio.

Soul music today has a broader context than the Stax/Atlantic soul that I grew up with...

That's funny because my dad played piano by ear and he would sing Otis Redding and Percy Sledge songs and he always played these in a very simple style and so that was no genre to it at that point. To me soul music is genuine and holds so much emotion. I went to the Stax museum in Memphis earlier this year and it's hard to explain the kind of magic that those people had their hands on, given the time, and how important it was socially too. I sometimes feel self indulgent with what I do. Like my Dad would not be able to sit down and tell you what makes soul different from folk or whatever but he felt it. And that what was so special about those records then, it was the feeling.

In the 60's though a band like Love could evolve many genres and it didn't seem that strange were as now you kind of have to be one thing for marketing purposes...

People are always trying to define my music saying that it's so... I don't know. But all the artists that I respect are strong individuals. Joni Mitchell or Ray Charles, Van Morrison or Carole King none of them sat down and said I'm this or that type of singer and so must write this type of song.

Personally I went into a record shop to look for something new after my punk and electronic forays and picked up Dwight Yoakam's first album because of the look of it...

Guitars, Caddillacs. That's the best one.

... so I started to listen to county music then.

I think I fall under that country umbrella because I'm not that great a guitar player so when I was learning I could play those four chords so my road was based around traditional singing and melody. And it think that it's built up from there.

How much does the live performance come into it?

Performing is awesome. You can let it all go, despite the fact that people are looking at you.

Do you set out to draw the audience into that space that can exist between a performer and the listener?

There is definitely a connection. It's like reality is heightened up there. You can create a connection that is real. But only real in that moment. I walk off stage and I'm back to plain old Tift Merritt then.

You are mentioned together with artists like Kathleen Edwards but do you feel any affinity?

I think it natural and I think it's good in a way. Often just to think that these women are going through similar process and I want to go and have a drink and a night out with them. But in fact our paths don't cross very often. Like we have a friend who does sound for My Morning Jacket and he met Kathleen who said to be sure and say hi when he met me. It's that sort of thing. One person I really admire is Emmylou Harris and I met her at one of the Landmine Benefit concerts she does and Mary Chapin Carpenter had hurt her back so at the last minute they called me to do a couple of shows. The first one was in my home town, so my parents came, I was sitting next to Emmylou and it was a "Oh my gosh, you're my hero" thing. She introduced me to the home town crowd no one knew I'd be there and then when I was singing one of my songs and someone started singing harmony and it was "Emmylou is singing harmony on my song". And then I went "she knows the words to my song!". My mother said to me after that "you don't get anything for Christmas because you just got everything you ever wanted". (laughs)

TRACKS ON THE HIGHWAY

MUSIC REVIEWS

ALL REVIEWS BY STEVE RAPID
* REPRESENTS PERSONAL PICS

Gretchen Wilson *All Jacked Up* Epic

The feisty phenomenon is back for a second round of her cookin' country. She sings for the everyday lives of those women who identify with her former life, that of a working mother/partner who's not afraid of having fun, or an opinion. *Full Time Job* tells that story, while *California Girls* sings the praises of those women who *don't* live the Hollywood lifestyle. All the songs here come from that place, from an understanding of a real life. The fact that she has had a hand in co-writing many of the tracks here gives them a level of authenticity that is often lacking in the work of her contemporaries. The closing *Not Bad For a Bartender* encapsulates her story and sums up her life to date. Wilson also co-produces with Mark Wright and Big and Rich's John Rich, and so also has a say in how this album sounds. It sounds, well, big and it is undeniably country music - with all the hallmarks of that genre. There's a hidden track at the end and a duet with Merle Haggard to add spice to the mix. But it's delivered in a way that is very much of today without making any concessions to crossover-pop stylings. She doesn't need to, as this album has already hit the top spot in the US (though neither of its two single have attained that top spot so maybe radio hasn't quite got behind her this time out). *All Jacked Up* is, for me, a better album from an artist who, while not exactly traditional, understands the tradition and values of country music and has remained true to herself.

Dave Knudsen *The Weeping City* Boronda

Part of L.A.'s alternative country scene, Dave Knudsen has a band that includes fellow songwriters Mike Stinson and Kip Boardman. Ostensibly linked to the LA scene, Knudsen's music is an attractive blend of urban folk tales and blues informed rock with the overtones of the aforementioned alternative country stylings. Knudsen has a coarse but believable voice and songs that deal with life in today's urban environment. There are ups and there are many downs, the latter expressed in such songs as the downbeat but hopeful yearning of *My Beautiful Dream*, one of the songs that utilizes Joshua Grange's gliding pedal steel to good effect. Produced by Charlie McGovern the album has a sympathetic easy sound of a band in tune with both the songs and their intent. The use of ambient real sounds between tracks only add to the sense of a grounded expression of the human condition. *The Weeping City* and Dave Knudsen will largely fly under the radar of significant mainstream exposure. Within it's chosen parameters it is yet another enjoyable and evocative lo-key album that is part of a growing body of music that has its independent heart intact. *The Weeping City* shows Knudsen to be an artist worthy of attention and inspection. A song like *Something Good That Lasts* could easily be recorded by any number of frontline artists. www.daveknudsen.net

Old 97's *Alive and Wired* New West

Hot on the heels of their live in concert DVD (simply titled *Live* and recorded at a different concert) comes this double CD recorded in Texas at the famous Gruene Hall. It is a testament to their power as a live roots-rock band. The roots side is best exemplified on songs like *West Texas Teardrops* or their take on Haggard's *Mama Tried*, while the rock side is delivered on catchy crowd pleasers like *King Of All The World*. 30 tracks in all may be too much for some but, for this listener, seemed just about right. There is enough variety in the material and tempos to never get stuck in the rut that some live shows can. The songs are powered by memorable choruses, strong guitar riffs and committed singing. The regret of *Salome* is balanced against the rush of *Rollerskate Skinny*. *Alive and Wired* lives up to it's title and is recommended to anyone who likes to hear an unembellished two guitar, bass and drum outfit really deliver the goods.

Peter Bruntnell *Ghost In A Spitfire* Loose

Like Michael Weston King, Peter Bruntnell offers a very English take on Americana, adapting the sounds and methods of that music to a subject matter that is much closer to home. Tracks like *Perfume River* are more synth than steel and suggest that the artist has grown away from his more obvious roots, having more in common with latter day Son Volt or Wilco than anything alt.countryified. But by the very next track, the title cut, you have some languid lap steel underpinning the wistful vocals, which without a lyric sheet, one has to strain to catch. Bruntnell however produces this outing with skill and clarity. He has always made interesting music and this album reaches a peak that makes it a strong listen. Again mention needs to be made of the contribution of James Walbourne, Bruntnell's long time accompanist and friend for his sensitive playing. Bruntnell is an under-valued musician whose work is easily the equal of many of his more reknowned US contemporaries. *Something I Lost* is an understated gem if you want to highlight just one track, and there are many worth picking out, but in truth it is a balanced listening experience that easily rewards repeated listening.

Various Artists *New Music From New West* New West

From a label that has gathered together a roster of some excellent artists (some escaping from the major label syndrome others coming in from the fringes) comes this worthy compilation. The list of artist here should be testament enough to the labels integrity and good taste. Dwight Yoakam, John Hiatt, Shaver, Buddy Miller, Chuck Prophet and, er, Alice Cooper. Then there are the up and coming contenders like Tim Easton, Sarah Lee Guthrie and Johnny Irion or Ben Lee as well as more established artists like Old 97's, Drive-by Truckers or Vic Chesnut. As with any compilation there are going to be artists here who will appeal to some more than others and vice versa but there's something here that would appeal to just about everyone. 18 artist 20 tracks - go New West young man!

Various Artists *Start Your Own Country* Loose

A slightly different direction from Loose in the latest in their series of compilations that gather together the many strands of alt.country to illuminate the varied possibilities that existing under any such all encompassing umbrella. 20 tracks from 20 disparate artists who range from the primitive, short, opening track *Stettler* by Roger Dean Young through Old Reliable, who have made some fine albums in the past and this track, from their latest, is equally good. Quite a few of the artist featured here are Canadian and highlight the rich seam that is that country's roots music community. Steve Ketchen and The Kensington Hillbillies version of *Straight To Hell*, makes me want to hear more, something any good compilation should do. And its not the only track that does that, which in itself should be a recommendation to anyone looking for an introduction to some fine new music sources. Give me more of *Justin Rutledge* and

The Junction Forty whose *Too Sober To Sleep* is a cracking song of steel, piano and poignancy. They have also included some tracks previously unavailable such as Charlemagne's subtle, rolling version of Chip Taylor's *Angel Of The Morning*, or Jim Bryson's (with Blue Rodeo's Jim Cuddy) version of his own *Somewhere Else*. The booklet gives useful information on all the acts featured including relevant websites. Loose again have produced another in their very collectable and listenable series *New Sounds from the Old West* that shouldn't be ignored.

Tift Merritt *Home Is Loud* Oil Rig Recordings

Essentially this is Tift's gig CD, not available in the usual stores, it shows her and her five piece band in full flight at a gig in front of a home crowd in North Carolina on June 4th 2005. It highlights Tift's expressive and powerful voice and the band's understated musical ability. The nine tracks feature songs from both albums and cover her rock/soul sound alongside her rootsy side. The slower songs like *Ain't Looking Closely*, *Laid A Highway* and *Supposed To Make You Happy* offer quiet, sensitive readings that sit beside more upfront workouts like *Neighborhood* and *Tambourine*. Merritt is a natural singer and performer and this CD finds her in her natural space, communicating with her audience with all sides enjoying the experience.

Michael Hill *The Vanishing Season* MPH Recordings

Recorded in Seattle and Dallas, multi-instrumentalist Hill produced this album with drummer Jim King. It is another album that is hard to categorize, not a bad thing, and runs from simpler arrangements like *Fair Weather Friend* to the rocking numbers like *Go Down Swinging*. Songs like *Word Gets Around* also hit home, built as it is with a hard guitar riff and cello motif building to a full on band sound. Hill's voice is strong enough to work in the various contexts in which it is placed. The self-explanatory *Until You Gave The World To Me* is another strong and effective song. Michael Hill reminds me of someone who I can't quite place, but is distinctive enough to warrant attention to his music. The rootsier songs like *Batten Down The Hatches* and *My Destination* may appeal to LH readers more than some tracks, but Hill has produced a collection of songs are worth more than a casual listen. www.michael-hill.net

Brad Paisley *Time Well Wasted* Arista

Despite one of the worst album covers I've seen in a long time this is mainstream man Paisley's best album yet. Always a straight up traditionalist, with a contemporary twist, he plays country music as if he means it. A fine guitar picker too, he explores the kind of themes that country radio can live with, although the single *Alcohol* might have raised a few eyebrows. Producer Frank Rogers gives the sound a turbo-twist that packs a punch that you expect from a Music Row outing but still keeps the music on track. Guests include Alan Jackson and Dolly Parton but it's Paisley who's the star. A strong singer, player and writer, he writes two songs solo and co-writes several others as well as using outside songs like Guy Clark/Darrell Scott's *Out In The Parking Lot* (with Jackson). Paisley is well established now, so hopefully he will be able to push his traditional side further and with a number of mainstream artists making more obviously country albums maybe there will be a realization that there's still an audience for the real thing, something that for a good while has been left to the indies.

Ryan Adams & The Cardinals *Jackson City Nights*

Lost Highway

This is the second of three albums released in 2005 and by far the most country album Adams has released in a long time. Again it is with the Cardinals, though with a slightly different line-up. The overall feel is of 70's country rock but with an edge that Adams always brings to his interpretation of different musical styles. The songs deal with a lot of emotions from loss, in *Dear John*,

to regret in the restrained, powerful *Games*. In fact there is an overall sadness, a particularly downbeat view on life, as the pervading mood of the whole album and that is well matched in the arrangements, the strings, the pedal steel all extend that dark feeling. Yet overall the album has a positive feel and energy, for instance the upbeat feel of the music in *My Heart Is Broken* is at odds with it's downbeat lyrical theme. The album ends with a cover of *Always On My Mind* that Adams delivers with dignity and it makes a perfect end to a suite of sad songs, and is Adams' best album in some time. The debate will doubtless continue that one album with the best of all three would have been a absolute killer, but that's Ryan Adams for you.

Ryan Adams *29* Lost Highway

This third album is a more stripped back selection of songs that finds him working again with Ethan Johns and recording in LA. It is less of a country-influenced that the previous two albums though it's not completely devoid of that strand of his work. A couple of the songs like *Blue Sky Blues* and *Starlite Diner* are built around Adams' piano and subtle shadings and are both effective and reminders of his early solo gigs. *Carolina Rain* is a plaintive song with pedal steel and a shuffle beat, while *The Sadness* has a border feel and some punchy electric guitar. By way of contrast the closing *Voices* is an haunting use of just acoustic guitar and voice. As with all his work Ryan Adams shows his considerable talent and, at times, his need for an editor. But credit is due for three albums that all have outstanding moments. He can't be underestimated.

Richard Buckner and Jon Langford *Sir Dark Invader Vs The Fanglord Fargoe*

On paper an unlikely pairing but none-the-less an intriguing album that manages to bring something of each man's distinct personality together. The music is often raucous and vibrant. The standout for me is *Tom Apart* a powerful song fueled by mandolin riffs and a dynamic rhythm section. The two sing together with Langford's distinctive voice taking lead. Buckner lead vocal on *Stayed* is a close second and is more typical of his own work but equally poignant in this context. Jon Langford must spend most of his life in studios, the number of projects, solo or with the Mekons or Waco Brothers that he's involved with. This pairing is certainly worth hearing. As the final baritone guitar-led closer says *Do You Want To Go Somewhere?* Yes boys, lead on.

Dierks Bentley *Modern Day Drifter* Capitol

The second album from Bentley picks up from where the debut left off with many of the same people involved. Producer Brett Beavers again helms the project but it sounds a little more assured and is my favourite of the two. Bentley, perhaps more than any other major label artist, has garnered some press and praise from alt magazines like *No Depression* as well as from the mainstream country press. He has a strong assured voice and is a solid writer, mostly with producer Brett Beavers and usually one other partner but he also includes songs from guest Del McCoury and one from Jamie Hartford. The sound has lots of steel, fiddle and banjo mixed in with the rockin' band, which all makes for a strong and largely memorable mix. Slower songs like *Good Things Happen* highlight his voice and ability to put feeling into a song. By way of contrast the more lively songs like *Domestic*, *Light* and *Cold* work well too. Dierks Bentley is another sign that something more substantial may be happening on Music Row. We need a few more modern day drifters

The Gibson Brothers *Red Letter Day* Sugar Hill

With nods to the classic brother harmony duos of yore the brothers Gibson - Leigh and Eric - produce a lively take on classic bluegrass and points beyond. Opening with a captivating take on Don Gibson's *Lonesome Number One* it sets the tone for an album that mixes originals with a strong selection of

songs like Bruce Robison's title cut, the Ray Charles co-write *I Got a Woman*, which actually translates a lot better that I would have supposed. That they also include Chris Knight's *If I Were You* (an album highlight), says a lot for their wide ranging taste and interests. They close the set with a version of *It's All Over Now* that also kicks ass. And the original songs are no slouches either, from the memories of *The Barn Song* to the regretful *We Won't Dance Again* which moves beyond the conventional by including pedal steel and percussion. This new Gibson Brothers album is their best yet and they are a vital link in the progression of the acoustic/bluegrass chain that, while never becoming newgrass, has its heart in the past and its mind on the future.

The Highwaymen *The Road Goes On Forever* Capitol

This 10th anniversary edition adds one song from the sessions as well as number of brief acoustic run throughs and a DVD of the recording process from which those demos are taken. They work far better in that overall visual context. The third Highwaymen outing was a Don Was production and was arguably the best. And the legendary quartet are shown at ease, if not afraid to make fun of one another. So yes it's worth it for the DVD, but perhaps not for the additional audio tracks. Those coming to it fresh will undoubtedly enjoy the interplay and the strong production and playing on show here from the Mount Rushmore of Country Music.

Kris Kristofferson *This Old Road* New West

By now pretty everyone knows where Mr. Kristofferson is coming from. The man and his guitar and his songs have played here enough for this new album to make sense, on many levels. The songs are about freedom, personal and political - again nothing new in that, as that largely been his theme for some time now. At 70 the voice is reflective of that but equally it's filled with a certain wisdom, as it is with weariness at the ways of the world. Produced by Don Was this is a very bare bones affair. On occasion, it features the trio of long-time accompanist Stephen Bruton, ace drummer Jim Keltner and the aforementioned Was on bass but otherwise it's down to just voice and guitar. The title track is a re-run of the same song from his *Repossessed* album. The remaining ten songs talk about fellow travellers such as Steve Earle and Merle Haggard (*Wild American*) or about looking to the good times (*Chase The Feeling*). The deeper meaning of love is also considered also (*Holy Creation*). Kris talks about being a song-writing in his heyday (*The Show Goes On*). Anyone who caught and enjoyed his recent shows will enjoy this, though I suspect those who looked for a fuller sound and hit songs have already given up on the Kris Kristofferson of today. Their loss.

Rosanne Cash *The Very Best Of* Legacy

An hour long, 16 track retrospective from her days at Columbia filled with songs that are often reflections of her own life. Some are strongly country, other move in a more rock vein but all are filled with her impassioned singing and personalized writing, which highlights her skill as an interpretative singer. Witness her version of John Hiatt's *The Way We Mend A Broken Heart* or the Tom Petty/Benmont Tench song *Never Be You* (here in an alternative version). Then there's family connection, the version of her father's *Tennessee Flat Top Box*, her ex-husband Rodney Crowell's *No Memories Hangin' Around*, a highlight, recorded as a duet with Bobby Bare, as well as songs with her new husband John Leventhal. A fine, mid-priced collection that is an ideal starting place. It also includes the song from her last Capitol album that featured Mr. Cash in a perfect cameo performance.

Various Artists *Walk The Line* Sony/BMG

The question has been asked as to why anyone would want these movie recreations when the originals are freely available. It is a tribute to the striking vocal performances of Joaquin Phoenix and

Reese Witherspoon, and the others who manage to inhabit these songs and legitimize their existence. Add producer T Bone Burnett's attention to detail and you can't fault the end product, which, as a reminder of the movie, is a reason enough to at least listen. I enjoyed it. No, it won't replace the originals but, as with many of the tribute albums available it has a function. And there is also the fact that there will undoubtedly be a younger audience of the film who will be unexposed to Johnny Cash in person, or on record, for whom these will be the definitive versions.

Neil Diamond *12 Songs* American

Rick Rubin produced this album and used the template of 'less is more' that he used so effectively with Johnny Cash. I haven't listened to Neil Diamond for a long time, nor felt the need to, but this is an album that works as both a reassessment of his songs and voice and as a continuation of his recording career for his longtime fans. His voice is strong and distinctive while the songs are reflections on life at a certain age. For doing it this way Rubin is to be commended as is Diamond for stripping the arrangements back, and since no other musicians are credited, for his playing. Opening songs *Hell Yeah* and *Oh Mary* are particularly strong. *Delirious Love* and *Man Of God* offer seemingly opposing viewpoints, and are rather two sides of the same coin, both are memorable. Neil Diamond is a "man of hope" and *12 songs* is testament to his strengths and convictions. The second of the two additional songs a second take on *Delicious Love*, with Brian Wilson, is a meeting of minds and hints at where Diamond could go next.

Fur Dixon and Steve Werner *The Pearls And The Swine* Grass and Gravel*

This duo make engaging and effusive music which, as the sleeve says, is new-timey in the folk and bluegrass tradition. Which goes part of the way to explain what the core of this music is but it doesn't really let you hear the vibrancy and sheer spirit that their music has. Largely acoustic they add Paul Marshall on bass on many tracks but also add drums and pedal steel on occasion. Add to that both Fur and Steve are good singers and players. Right On Time is an extension of what Woodie Guthrie was doing many moons ago. The songs, about life and travel are written by one or other of the duo and the songs are memorable, the title track is an self-effacing love song. They deserve to be considered in the same light as many more famous duet couples and they play with a sense of infectious ease that makes this album well worth seeking out. www.furandsteve.com

Kevin Banford *Between Heaven and L.A.*

Kevin's last album *King Of The Thrift Store Cowboys* was an enjoyable outing and here we have his next album offering more of the same straight-up country. Essentially it is a feast of real-time tales of drinking, like *Double Or Nothing* or across-the-border tales, as with *Stars Of Mexico*, as well songs of heartbreak and memories. All are full of sweeping steel and fine playing. Kevin can also deliver a slower song with conviction and commitment. The sound and the songs are rooted in classic country. As such, there is nothing new or remotely ground breaking, but that again is to miss the whole point of such an album. It is about a song, the telling of a story, and a sympathetic setting that gives the song life. There is nothing alternative about Kevin Banford. He's country to the core and this album will appeal who likes their country neat, if not aged.

Two Tons Of Steel *Vegas* Palo Duro

Similar territory is covered by Austin based band Two Tons Of Steel whose new Lloyd Maines produced is an assured affair. The opening title track is spiced with mariachi horns and twanging guitars. Its strength is in the strong songs, originals from singer Kevin Geil and there are some choice covers including *Secret Agent Man* (also covered by Devo), the classic *Red Hot* and making another appearance (it was also featured on a earlier album) is

their country take on the Ramones *I Wanna Be Sedated* a song which has since been performed by such diverse roots artists as John Hiatt and Jason Ringenberg. Two Tons Of Steel played an infectious mix of country and rockabilly flavoured roots music that could easily appeal to a wider audience, given the breaks. In that respect they have a similar feel to early Mavericks or latter day Derailers. This five piece band are dynamic and direct and deserve your attention if you like well played western beat, an appropriate label for their sound.

Todd Thibaud *Northern Skies* North 95

Recently Todd played here as support to Slaid Cleaves and was impressive. Here, with a full band, he comes into his own. Perhaps the most readily recognizable name here is ex Fairport Convention drummer Dave Mattacks, who is in good company as the ensemble playing here is powerful, as are Thibaud's songs and his voice. This is roots rock and is post-Springsteen in its dynamic and telling of human conditions. Todd's slower songs also hit home. *Isn't Love My Friend* tells of hollow relationships and human vulnerability. *Where You Can't Be Found* deals in an understated way with a similar theme. Elsewhere the mood changes, musically at least, on *Lost Again* with its vibrant mandolin and dobro. Sleep, or lack of it, are central to *Beautiful Dream* and *Sleep Tonight*, two more acoustic-based songs, ones that most everybody can relate to, at some point or other in their life. The album closes with *Only A Fool*, a reflection on life's mysteries and concludes that "...only God knows what it all means" over some brooding organ playing. This is a moody but ultimately uplifting album that marks Thibaud as yet another fine troubadour to watch, and listen, for.

Hawkensaw Boys *Nettwerk*

Framed in the sounds of bluegrass the Hawkensaw Boys are a six piece acoustic band with the instrumentation you would expect from a band moving in that direction. However the material varies quite a bit in terms of themes. *Kiss You Down There* may not be a usual topic for the likes of Ricky Skaggs, but over the history of acoustic string band music it is not unheard of. A song like the opening *Sun's Work* has a subtler appeal. It's the more frantic songs like *We Are Many*, a song about immediate community, that legitimizes the punk rock connection. But in truth they are broader in their appeal than that with other songs like *Hugh Faller* and *Bordertown*. This is their fourth album, but the first that hasn't been self-released, and is widely available. If you like acoustic (not strictly) bluegrass music or label mates Old Crow Medicine Show this is worth checking out, as some of the songs are portraying real and gritty feelings with a sense of immediacy that is compelling.

Alan Jackson *Precious Memories* ACR

This is a simple and stripped back album that was recorded for Jackson's family and friends and is now made available to a everyone after persuasion from his label. It is basically an heartfelt expression of faith that places emphasis on Jackson's warm and welcome voice. The subject matter will not be for everyone but the performance and sincerity may help win you over. It will certainly be something his long-time fans will want.

Willie Nelson *You Don't Know Me* Lost Highway

Subtitled the Songs of Cindy Walker it is exactly that. 13 songs from her catalogue performed by Nelson in traditional country style. Now Willie's day must go something like - have a spliff, play golf, record an album, have a spliff, play a gig, have another spliff. One can't say that he is not prolific. Having said that, I best enjoy Willie in his more country moments and this is one. The songs from *Bubbles In My Beer* to *Just Walkin' Out The Door* come over as relaxed and robust. Willie sings these as if he's been singing them for years and probably has. One for the fans of classic country, the playing is spot on throughout.

The Little Willies *Milking Bull*

If you liked the more country sounding tracks on Norah Jones's albums then this side-project will doubtless please. A five piece band that includes producer Lee Alexander and guitarist Jim Campilongo deliver a relaxed, and sometimes jazzy, take on some classic country songs, as well as a brace of original songs. The vocals are shared between Richard Julian and Jones. The keyboards of Jones and guest player John Dryden are prominent, mixed with Julian's and Campilongo's guitars. The end result is not that far removed from the country covers that were included on Jones own albums, though in this context the focus is on a band setting with everyone getting a chance to shine. This is an undemanding and enjoyable little album, the highlights of which, are Townes' *No Place To Fall*, the jaunty and resigned cover of Willie's *I Gotta Get Drunk*, Alexander's *Roll On* but best is their take of *The Streets Of Baltimore*. The closing track is the intriguingly named *Lou Reed*, as they claim to have seen on their travels the noted figure indulging in the sport of "cow-tipping". A irreverent and tongue-in-cheek way to close what sound like a fun album for all involved.

Albert Lee *Road Runner* Sugar Hill

Another veteran performer is Albert Lee and his latest solo album finds him still making striking music. Lee may not be the most compelling vocalist but he certainly does not let himself down. His guitar playing prowess has never been in doubt and there is much of that here to enjoy, from the opening take on *Road Runner* through his own *Payola Blues*, a seven minute plus guitar workout that shows off the finesse of those flying fingers. There are good covers of John Hiatt's *Rock Of Your Love* and Leo Kottke's *Julie's House* that shows his time working with the Everly Brothers rubbed off on him. The final track is a version of Richard Thompson's *Dimming Of The Day* done as a duet with Alexandra Lee that is classic. Produced by Lee and Steve Fishell *Road Runner* has a strong, warm sound perfectly suited to Lee's enjoyable roots music endeavours and is well worthy of him.

Billy Yates *Harmony Man* M.O.D

Billy Yates has had some success as a writer (for many having George Jones cut one of your songs is a pinnacle of achievement) yet Yates also wants to be recognised as a performer. After his debut album vanished when his label Almo closed it's doors he formed M.O.D (My Own Damn Label) and has released his own records with no one looking over his shoulder. It is surprising how mainstream country they are and also why he is not on a major label! The standard of writing, production, playing and singing is right up there and not in any obvious way different, other than perhaps a more subtle rhythm section than is found on many major label releases. The songs deal with typical concerns for a country album - love, family, life, everyman. Yates co-writes and all the songs here are written with a variety of different writers but all have Yates as a constant. They are country to the core and proud of it. They may take a harder edge that some Texas acts have, but within the context of classic country they work well. The closing acapella gospel track, *Talk About Sufferin'* not only offers something of a point of difference as well as a testament to Yates' faith. Billy Yates is a solid dependable artist deserving of wider attention. www.billyyates.com

Todd Fritsch *Todd Fritsch* Diamond Music

Another independent artist who is solidly country, though with a sound that is slightly more varied. Here producer Doug Deforest brings a strong sense of dynamic to the sound, recorded in Arkansas and Nashville with local musicians. Deforest playing bass and co-writing several songs with Fritsch and others. He also co-manages Fritsch, and so is very involved with every aspect of Fritsch's career. The songs are generally good from the lively opening *I Got Mexico*, which has strong border overtones in the music to the swing style of *Bob Wills' Song*. There are also quieter moments like *Corpus Christi Callin'*. The cover of *Walk Softly On The Bridges* is also handled well. The final track

is a heartfelt dedication to the late Chris Ledoux and closes what is a very country album, one that is largely mainstream in outlook if not attitude. A well produced, played and performed album from an artist who is bound to do well on with those who love their country strait. www.toddfritsch.com

Linda McLean *No Language* Bongo Beat*

Canadian artist McLean treads a similar path to Kathleen Edwards in that she makes roots orientated rock music with her husband Andy, who co-writes the music and plays the guitars. McLean writes the words and sings in a strong, gritty voice that delivers these songs of displacement, relationships and the inevitability of change. The four piece band offer some robust roots revivalism. Guitar, bass, drums and keyboards all emphasizing the core emotions that underpin these songs. The album, as a whole feels good and delivers the kind of strong statement of intent that you don't often recognize on a first acquaintance. McLean is continuing a tradition of strong female music exponents rather than inventing or delivering anything new, but she does it with a sense of genuine emotion that it transcends any language.

Frog Holler *Haywire* ZoBird

The latest album from this Pennsylvania six piece is a solid grounded rockin' roots outing that is built around the songs of singer Darren Schlappich and uses such colourings as lap steel, mandolin, banjo, accordion and keyboards on top of a solid rhythm section and some crunchy guitars and electronic sounds, the latter exemplified by *One Last Time*. The more rootsy side, with banjo to the fore, is shown on songs like *Pepper & Salt* and *Terms and Conditions*. Schlappich's songs are literary and evocative and the band give them similar settings that make for a rewarding listen, one that works well with repeated plays. Frog Holler have a multi-dimensional sound that allows the individual instruments to have their own space and place. Schlappich's voice adds focus to the songs and he tells his tales well.

Six Mile Grove *Bumper Crop* Rena's Kitchen Music

Although rockabilly is mentioned in the press release this is in truth another roots rock collection from a melodic and inventive band. This self-produced quartet's album has some strong songs, from the opening *Heartache Parade* to the immediacy of the twang filled uptempo catchiness of *Man Of Steel* and on through a selection of other fulfilling songs, a bumper crop in other words. Based in the Midwest, this band just get on and do what they do on their own terms. The songs are introspective. There is also some humour and bounce, for instance the driving rhythm behind *Later On* pushes the guitar and banjo to the fore, a sense of structure that occurs throughout. Brandon Sampson's lyrics tell stories that all can understand while the band are always on the money. I hadn't heard Six Mile Grove before but on the strength of this fine album they will be well worth further investigation. www.sixmilegrove.com

The Sadies *In Concert - Volume One* Yep Roc*

Straight up the Sadies, one of my favourite bands, have made one of the best live albums I've ever heard. Their blend of country, surf/spaghetti rock, roots music and more just about ties up all of my favourite sounds. Recorded over two night in February it covers so many bases and sounds that after 41 tracks I was looking for more. How often can you say that of an album? Alongside their own songs they cover songs by the Band, Syd Barrett as well as Tommy Duncan and Bob Wills and they do them all with skill and verve. They are wonderfully accomplished players and are joined by a host of guests including family members and such fellow Canadians as Neko Case and Blue Rodeo as well as honoured guests as Garth Hudson. Then add Jon Langford (who they have recorded an album with) and Jon Spencer and you have one a fiery brew. Don't take my word for it go and at least listen to this fabulous band. The Sadies area beat group to beat most groups. Roll on volume two.

Brian McDade *Love Bayou* OTN

McDade has a soulful hint to his voice and there are a lot of swelling Hammond tones behind it, but something about this album never really connected for me. Produced by McDade and Jeff "Stick" Davis it was recorded in Nashville and has a full sound and some strong performances from the four piece band, but it seems to lack a certain edge that you find in the work of someone of a similar ilk like Graham Parker. There are songs that stand out like *Sunset (Over Bargeddie)* and *Blood On A Desert Rose* that stand out. But otherwise it all comes off a little too anonymous

Bill Sheffield *Journal On A Shelf* American Roots Records

This self produced album is a simple and straight forward selection of acoustic blues songs, sung and played by Sheffield. The songs are largely self-penned with a couple of covers like Tom Waits' *An Invitation To The Blues*. Sheffield is a good acoustic player with a full-on voice and this album showcases his all-round talent. It can't really be classed as country, or alt.country for that matter, but fans of this type of music would be advised to check this modern-day exponent out. www.billsheffieldblues.com

Willard Grant *Conspiracy Let It Roll* Loose

Robert Fisher's collective goes from strength to strength. His sound is many faceted and multi-leveled with a wide range of instruments in the mix. Fisher's big voice is central to the sound, a sound which has long moved away from any easy categorisation. But his album provides a space for imaginations to roam and for spirits to soar. I have enjoyed the previous albums of Willard Grant Conspiracy and this is no exception, offering as it does another glimpse into the mind of Fisher and his fellow travellers. A instrumental river of quiet filled with occasional ripples like *Flying Low* that are melodic and memorable. He also includes his version of Dylan's *Ballad Of A Thin Man*. Engaging and beautiful, if not for everyone.

Tim O'Brien *Cornbred Nation / Fiddler's Green* Sugar Hill

Two simultaneous releases from the prolific O'Brien who now offers a wide range of songs. Seen by many as primarily a bluegrass/traditional artist O'Brien can play with such diverse performers as Steve Earle (as a member of the Bluegrass Dukes) and Paul Brady as well as the best bluegrassers and newgrassers. On *Cornbred Nation* he covers a range of traditional and classic songs alongside some of his own with a group of musicians that include the excellent and very versatile Kenny Vaughn on guitar and Kenny Malone on drums. Add to them talents like sister Mollie, Dirk Powell and Jerry Douglas and you know the playing is going to be top notch. O'Brien himself is no instrumental slouch and possesses an expressive voice that is the focus of these songs: which blend more acoustic settings with the ones using the electric guitar and rhythm section to good effect. *Cornbred Nation* includes a delightful take on Harlan Howard's *Busted*, Jimmie Rodgers' *California Blues* and his version of *House Of The Rising Son*. The second CD *Fiddler's Green* takes a similar approach mixing originals and traditional songs, this time with the overall theme of passing over. *Fair Flowers Of The Valley* is a standout, while the sparser *Foreign Lander* and *Buffalo Skinners* work equally well. Kenny Vaughn shows his skill again here on a excellent version of the much recorded *Long Black Veil* and also on *Early Morning Rain*, the Gordon Lightfoot classic. A frequent visitor to these shores Tim O'Brien will cement his reputation with these two fine albums.

Richmond Fontaine *The Fitzgerald* El Cortez

Again working with producer JD Foster Richmond Fontaine have crafted a compelling and understated album that takes a look at life as a series of often trying vignettes. The album rarely raises a smile (or a sweat) but is none-the-less a look into the lives of people who you would often try to avoid on the street. That may not be the most inviting concept for a collection of songs,

and indeed if you're looking for your sing-along country pop fix then boy are you ever in the wrong place. But if literate, lo-fi tales of longing and lost desires are something that has a place in your vision then spend some time with the worn-down residents of the Fitzgerald. There is a tragic beauty about these songs and the characters and the places that they inhabit that makes the album something that has a kind of quiet hope attached to it, even if the hope is that you may never end up like some of the protagonists. Willy Vlautin's voice becomes the voice of these people and he is filled with their sense of loss and, at times, purpose. Richmond Fontaine's growing audience will be entranced with these songs and their understanding and it's going to be interesting to see where they take their music.

Dale Watson and his Lone Stars Heeah CRS

A collection of newly recorded songs that Watson and his current edition of the Lone Stars (with the help of Floyd Domino on piano and Jon Blondell on trombone) have chosen from songs that were included in his live set but never laid down before. As such it may be just another Watson album, yet there is a sense that he is enjoying recording these songs. Dale's fans will enjoy this album and it contains some strong performances from Watson, while the band is in fine form, especially Don Don Pawlak on steel. The piano and trombone add some welcome texture to the overall sound, then this is an album his fans will indeed say Heeah to. It's been a good while since Dale Watson played in Ireland so any new music is worth listening to and Watson remains true to his original intentions and continues to make hard-core country music. For that, Hail Dale.

Darden Smith Field Of Crows Dualtone

Smith has moved along from the more rootsy albums he made at the beginning of his career and has carved a particular niche among his songwriting contemporaries. His impressionistic lyrics are matched by careful arrangements and subtle rhythms and his always distinctive voice. When all these come together on a more direct song like *Satisfied* you can see how Darden Smith, with the right exposure, could reach out to a wider audience. Another song that shines out is *Fight For Love* a plea of love and understanding that has a strong harmony vocal from Eliza Gilkyson and has an anthemic, universal appeal. Also notable are Stuart Smith and David Mansfield, who with others deliver strong instrumental and vocal support. This is one of Darden Smith's best albums yet, and he remains an under-rated artist, who despite his Texas origins sounds somewhat more European and, with the right breaks, could make greater inroads into audiences over here.

Scott Miller and The Commonwealth Citation Sugar Hill

For his latest outing Scott Miller has hooked up with noted producer Jim Dickinson and as you would expect from a man who has worked with such legends as the Stones, The Flamin' Groovies and Alex Chilton, there is a certain rough-edged rock abandon in the sound here. Recorded in Memphis it also picks up some of that city's ambience. The mix here is southern accented roots-rock and a couple of less is more restrained country-styled songs like *On A Roll* and *Long Goodnight*. The lack of a central theme that were inherent to the first two solo albums means that it hits several storylines from the road anthem *Freedom's A Stranger* to the topical take on Neil Young's *Hawks and Doves*. His use of a historical basis in songs is here taken up with *Say Ho*. Otherwise it's pretty much as before, a good album, one that may tread a little water but does it in style. Miller fans won't be disappointed.

Allison Moorer Getting Somewhere Sugar Hill

Continuing the more rock orientated direction that Moorer has moved in of late this album, her first produced by husband Steve Earle, is one that highlights her writing (all songs by Moorer, one with Earle) and increasingly confident and maturing vocals.

Hallelujah, a song about finding one's own sense of belonging and faith, allows her voice to lead the song, with its stripped down backing. Other songs have a fuller sound that makes good use of the band which includes Earle as well as Brady Blade, Jim Hoke, Brad Jones and Doug Lancio. *Where You Are* opens with strings and uses a strong double tracked vocal on a heartfelt love song. But the harder tones of *Take It So Hard* work equally well. But for this writer the closing *Getting Somewhere* is the album highlight. A sense of desperation set against a wall of distorted guitar, that yet, has a strong of hopefulness in its delivery.

Tim Easton Ammunition New West

The cover of Easton's last album was better suited to this album which is a more stripped down affair than its cover suggests. However it's the music that counts and there are a set of strong songs on display. The songs from *Next To You to I Don't Want To Come Home* deal in the complex nature of personal relationships and less personal politics. A drug craziness of yore in a more sober age is dealt with in *Dear Old Song And Dance*. While *News Blackout* takes a worldier view. *J.P.M.F.Y. F.* which means Jesus protect me from Your followers, a sentiment many would agree with. This is a thoughtful and strong album that is revealing of both Easton's mindset and that of the country he lives in. It is also his strongest musical statement to date and one worth spending time with. The closing track is a cover of the oft recorded *Sitting On Top Of The World*, with nods to Doc Watson.

Scott McClatchy Burn This LIB*

Following up the well received Redemption release, McClatchy continues to deliver his memorable songs in his heartland/roots blue-collar rock mode. The comparisons to Bruce Springsteen and John Mellencamp are both obvious and somewhat superfluous. What matters here is what is coming out of the speakers, and that is something few would argue with. The music speaks for itself, while falling within the confines of an particular musical mode. There are eleven songs of McClatchy's along side one Springsteen song, which is dedicated to a departed friend. Using a similar band to the one that accompanied him on his last album some four years back means that this is a well-rehearsed and tightly focused team. McClatchy is based in Brooklyn, and he has toured with some notable acts as Steve Earle and John Hiatt. The songs range from the electric 12 string melodic rock of the opening title track to the more acoustic sounding *Take A Little Walk With Me*, a song about showing someone the reality of their environment. The instrumentation includes fiddle, B3, piano, dobro and horns over the solid guitar, bass and drums core. McClatchy has a strong, rough-hewn but soulful voice and his songs are catchy enough to have an instant appeal. This may not be a particularly new sound but it is one that you will find yourself returning to and enjoying. If you are a fan of either of the above artists or of the all encompassing genres mentioned then this is well worth seeking out. Available from Miles of Music or from www.scotmcclatchy.com

Sunny Sweeney Heartbreaker's Hall Of Fame Self-Released*

A debut from a solidly country singer with just the right amount of twang in her voice. This 12 track album is full of strongly delivered songs, from her version of Libby Bosworth's *East Texas Pines* to DB Harris's *Here Lately* and two Jim Lauderdale co-written songs, the opening *Refresh My Memory* and *Please Be San Antonio*. She also covers the great Audrey Auld on *Next Big Nothing* which takes a somewhat hard but realistic view of fame. The band which includes co-producer and former Wagoner Tom Lewis alongside notable Texas players like Tommy Detamore, Bobby Flores, Casper Rawls and guitarist Lars Albrecht, is great and Sweeney delivers the songs with conviction and verve. She duets with Lauderdale, not on one of his songs but on Keith Sykes' *Lavendar Blue*. It works well as does pretty much everything

here. Sweeney has three songs that she had a hand in writing and they may be well something she will develop in the future. The title track, written on her own, is a mid-paced harmonica-laced lament that shows talent in that area. She also delivers a strong version of Iris DeMent's *Mama's Opry*. Whether Sunny Sweeney can bring her music to a wider audience is debatable given that this kind of hard country doesn't get much airplay, and if it does it usually comes from a major label. But you can avail of this delight yourself from www.sunnysweeney.com

Richard Dobson *On Thistledown Wind* Bramus

Now based in Switzerland, Dobson's latest album was recorded in Nashville and co-produced with his long-time guitarist Thomm Jutz, a man whose talents became abundantly apparent when he appeared in Dublin as Mary Gauthier's guitarist. Other players include Fats Kaplin, Mark Sergio Webb and Pat McInerney, fine players all. Dobson's 12 self-written tracks are all welcome examples of his craft. Particularly good are *Queen of My Heart*, *The Ballad Of Harpoon Barry* and the title track. The mood is good-time country with Kaplin's playing adding some telling fiddle and pedal steel touches. Jutz too is in top form, though the playing always supports the song and never gets flashy or distracting. Just good honest to God performances with Dobson's warm and upfront vocal lending the proceedings a very human quality. He is joined vocally by David Olney and Catherine Craig and others. The sound is diverse enough to include trumpet on the jaunty *Down Along The Reeperbahn*. If you know Dobson's work you will enjoy this album and if you don't but enjoy Texas singer-songwriters then this is worth looking out for, you can check out www.richard-j-dobson.ch for details.

Various Artists *Sail Away - The Songs Of Randy Newman* Sugar Hill

The writing of Randy Newman is considered to be, by some - including the sleeve note writer here - the best there is, pure genius. He certainly is up there and a fearless, amusing and often political storyteller he is. Here, some of Sugar Hill's finest, and some guests, tackle some of his songs that they obviously feel an affinity with. Tim O'Brien opens with the promise of a better life for slaves in *Sail Away*. A song, like many Newman's written, to be taken with a good deal of irony. Elsewhere Sonny Landreth adds his trademark slide to the appropriate *Louisiana 1927*. Steve Earle delivers a distorted vocal chorus on *Rednecks*. It also telling that his 1972 song *Political Science*, here recorded by The Duhs, is perhaps more pointed than when it was written. Bela Fleck gives a solo banjo instrumental rendition of *Burn On*. Tributes are notoriously hit and miss affairs in terms of listener response, as undoubtedly each performer is trying to give their best interpretation of the song they have chosen. So it's down to the individual listener to decide which songs and which artist works for them. But with such a skilled songwriter as the source there is much to recommend this album, even to the casual listener, even if none better the original versions. For this listener the Reckless Kelly/Joe Ely contribution *Rider In The Rain* is a highpoint.

Various Artists *Boppin' Hillbilly to Red Hot Rockabilly Proper***

An excellent 4 CD set accompanied by a 68 page booklet with notes on all the acts who range from such well known names as Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Marty Robbins and Carl Perkins to lesser known names like Earl Songer, Chuck Murphy or Barney Burcham. So with 118 tracks there is a lot here to discover and enjoy. Some of the sound quality varies, depending on the sources, but all is listenable. Given the whole package is at a budget price it is highly recommended to anyone with an interest in that fertile musical period that existed between 1950 and 1955 a heyday for hillbilly music and its exponents.

Steve Mayone *Unfortunate Son* Umver

Described as folk-pop, the bulk of this album may seem slightly at odds with the kind of music normally covered here, but Mayone is a strong songwriter with a voice to match. The songs range from the pop-rock sound of the tale of heroin addiction in *Black Poison* to the mandolin led folk of *Pocketful of Promises*. On this self-written, self-produced second album Mayone is accompanied at times by players like Duke Levine and Jimmy Ryan. The playing is good and supports Mayone's strong songs but from track 9 on things move into a different mode. *Truckee River*, a murder song, is a dobro fueled alt. country song full of tension and high atmosphere that makes it a stand-out. Next up another strong song *Another Lonely Day* with a full keyboard underpinned sound and some telling lap steel. The six minutes plus *Hour Of The Pearl* has pedal steel running through its length giving it a dynamic that helps push the mid-paced, languid song along. The album closes in a more rockin' stance with the questioning *Part Of Me*. A varied and interesting album that sounds better on several listenings and Mayone is a name worth remembering.

Jenny Queen *Girls Who Cry Need Cake* Laughing Outlaw

Queen is an American who has recorded her debut album in Sydney, using a producer from a different country to give a fresh perspective on her music. It is less rootsy and more poppy but not unlike a number of country associated acts who have moved away from that base in recent times. Queen has a understated but emotive voice that delivers her songs with a restrained passion. The one song she didn't co-write is an interesting take on Moby's *Porcelain*, that blends dobro with keyboards. The songs are strong on melody and Queen conveys the mood of each songs well. One for fans of contemporary female singer-songwriters and funnily enough among the full band sound the acoustic *Between The Riverbank And The Highway* is a stand-out and will strike a chord with anyone who has a spent time away from home. Many of the songs are written with Sam Shinazzi.

Barb Waters *Rosa Duet* Laughing Outlaw

As the title suggest an album of duets, one recorded over several years. Produced by Craig Pilkington it uses songs, for the most part co-written by Waters. Each vocal partner brings something special to the project, with its overall roots sound, it is a winner and definitely one to look out for. There is a nod to classic duets Lee and Nancy, George and Tammy, Gram and Emmylou as acknowledged in the liner notes. *Further Down The Line* with GIT, an all female trio, is a joy. In fact anyone who has enjoyed some of the recent duet albums like John Prine's should check this fine album out.

Jason Walker *Stranger To Someone* Laughing Outlaw

The latest album from Jason Walker is produced by labelmate Michael Carpenter and it's a goodie. A mix of his own songs and classic songs like *Apartment Number 9* and *Streets of Baltimore* which is one of five tracks that features the fabulous Audrey Auld on harmony or backing vocals. Add to that the pedal steel of Graham Griffith and you have the most traditional country sounding album of this Laughing Outlaw batch, even though it is a given it's own contemporary twist. Other writers covered include Mark Heard, Bruce Springsteen, Tom Waits and Gram Parsons. But Walker's own songs sit well in this company. Listen to *Other Side Of The Bar* or *Tears* for proof of that. The album closes with just Walker's voice and guitar and his song *Welcome To My World...* anytime.

John Fogerty *The Long Road Home* Fantasy*

Subtitled the ultimate John Fogerty - Creedence collection this is an excellent compilation of his Creedence Clearwater Revival hits and some highlights of his solo career. There are already numerous CCR albums out there, but this one features 5 new live solo recordings that are previously unreleased and are worth having for completists. The 25 tracks are testament to

the distinctive voice and solid writing that have been Fogerty's trademarks through the years. For any student of classic rock 'n' roll this should be a cornerstone album, a fine mix of rock and roots. That swamp-rock sound has never been better defined. The songs weren't without bite either as his *Fortunate Son*, which closes the album, shows a song written in one era which still resonates in another. As all the best rock music should.

Mark Knopfler and Emmylou Harris *All The Roadrunning* Mercury

This pairing is more Knopfler than Harris in tone. With 2 songs written by Harris the rest are from Knopfler. It is essentially a duets album with the voices trading verses or working in harmony. It is a listenable and restrained album but one that lacks a strong edge. It is more laid back than latent. Not that it is without its highpoints, in songs like *This Is Us* or the fiddle driven uptempo *Red Stagginger*. *Rollin' On* and the Kimmie Rhodes co-write *Love And Happiness* or Emmylou's self-written *Belle Star* comes across as tracks that could easily fit on one of her own albums. This is an album that will appeal to fans of both without ever transcending the work of either. It never edges into the kind of new territory that her ground breaking *Wrecking Ball* album did. But for all that it is a not without its charm and appeal. Those who prefer the more reflective nature of their work will be rewarded with this well played, produced and sung album. Just don't expect anything that will either shock or surprise you.

Darren Smith *Last Drive* Crafty

A very solid roots album from Smith, who is also a member of the Seattle band Straw Dogs. Smith writes songs that deal with the kind of realism that is commonplace and universal, and as such, easily translatable into everyday experience. The mix of mandolin, accordion and pedal steel over guitar, bass and drums background give it some earthy textures that all add to the album's overall mood. Darren Smith has a warm, expressive voice that makes *Last Drive* a pleasurable experience and one that rewards repeated listening. His writing has just the right sense of melodic structure to make songs memorable without being irritating. The context is downbeat overall but never down-hearted. *Last Drive* is symptomatic of this genre where these individual artist, often overlooked, make well thought out and executed albums that are largely ignored by the mainstream but, as is the case here, worth seeking out by the curious.

Straw Dogs *Tell The Rising Son* Crafty

The aforementioned Straw Dogs own album treads similar territory. But here the songs are written by singer David Von Beck with Darren Smith contributing guitar, keyboard and vocals. So perhaps next time out the band should combine both writer's songs. The opening song *Amelia* shows that the songs are strong. Von Beck and Smith's vocals are good as is the playing. *Not Gone* features their fine vocal harmonies on a well written song of failure and hope that also features Dan Tyack's emotive pedal steel playing. Over the 12 songs Von Beck proves himself a very capable writer who writes interesting songs and fronts a band that delivers these songs with skill and real feeling. Within their own environment Straw Dogs are undoubtedly respected, but there are a lot of acts out there doing something similar. *Tell The Rising Son* is the kind of album that is listenable, enjoyable but in the end may need to be more distinctive to attract to a wider audience.

Weed Patch *Some Kinda Happy* Oh Grow Up Already*

Although this album really just touches on the fringes our remit, it is full of inventive writing and playing which offers a wide texture of sounds that run from lap steel to synth, from punk rock banjo to trumpet. This is more of a "fucked-up folk" album, to give it the band's own description, there's more of a "folk you let's rock" attitude that fuels this record. They can run from the simple guitar, bass and drums settings to something that is more a sonic explosion. Singer and writer Neill Weiss delivers

his songs with a singular confidence that is echoed by the band's (and guests) inventive playing and use of some effective audio colourings. It was produced by Seth Rothschild, ex of Gingersol. The band are making the same move from the Americana base that Wilco did and in doing so will likely hook up with a wider audience. *Some Kinda Happy*, makes me just that. It has been one of the current crop of albums that I have listened to repeatedly and found myself enjoying. It is often fierce, fetching and fresh but it is also fun and that's the sound of a band enjoy themselves and it shows. www.weedpatchmusic.com

Gina Villalobos *Miles Away* Laughing Outlaw

This second albums continues Villalobos' hybrid of roots and confessional rock that is both vulnerable and tough. The songs, all by Villalobos except for the striking cover of the Bee Gees' *If I Can't Have You*, which sounds perfectly at home here among her own songs. The songs are transitional and look to finding a place to belong, without knowing where that might be. The music, delivered by her talented band, includes electric guitar, keyboards and pedal steel guitar. The sound is not country, as it has been describes but a broader palate that draws from the same well as artists like Anne McCue who adds her harmony vocals on one track here. It is strong, centered music that can have a broad appeal and would find favour with Lucinda Williams fans, or those who like their music to have some edge and a strong sense of hard won realism. It is also an album that plays like that, a unit, a body of work that works across it's 10 tracks. But if pushed then I suggest a listen to *Somewhere To Lay Down* as an example of the album's strengths.

Casey Driessen *3D* Sugar Hill

Master fiddler Driessen takes his traditional music seriously, but here on *3D* he takes it a lot further. This, mainly instrumental, album is full of skilled playing and forward thinking. Produced by Jason Lehnning it uses layers of sound to fashion a fusion that blends a number of different styles and techniques together. The top notch players include Viktor Krauss, Jerry Douglas, Tim O'Brien, Darrell Scott, Bela Fleck and the inventive percussion of Jamey Haddad. They use programming when it's called for or just fiddles as on the Nick Forster/Tim O'Brien song *Footsteps So Near* which Driessen sings with a treated vocal sound that adds a sinister aspect to the song, which is appropriate as it is a murder ballad. That darker element also appears in the traditional song *Country Blues*. It's one of several mixed alongside his own songs and those of such notable figures as Bill Monroe. There is much to admire here, especially if you are of a progressive disposition and mind. Not everyone will get it of course. But *3D* adds another string to Driessen's bow.

Alejandro Escovedo *The Boxing Mirror* Back Porch*

This is Escovedo's first album since illness and recovery forced him out of the picture for a time. His first on Back Porch with it's major label links and the first to see John Cale, a long time hero, at the production desk. Cale brings a sense of sonic dissonance to the melting pot which is still using the string section at its core, something that has become a trademark. But have no fear, or maybe be afraid, depending on your viewpoint as this album has a hard edge, a toughness that also runs through Escovedo's live performance. This album rocks. There is also his surrealistic sense of viewing the everyday and given it a new perspective, an introspection no doubt heightened during his recent recovery period. *Deerhead On The Wall* is a good example of this. Those who have grown up with and alongside the music of Alejandro Escovedo will savour this return which is also a growth and new phase of his musical vision. It also marks a good place to start if you're coming new to a unique voice in contemporary Americana. Listen also to *The Ladder* to see how succinct that is. While *Break This Time* allows us to see another side of the music, one which recalls his rockin' side. Welcome back Alejandro.

Bruce Springsteen *We Shall Overcome* Columbia

There are some amusing stories of fans in dismay feeling akin to Dylan going electric with Springsteen's move to (ironically) acoustic. But *Nebraska* should have given notice of his interest in the more stripped-down side of his psyche. That the songs here are largely public domain or traditional, songs associated with Pete Seeger, may be the problem. Springsteen gives these songs an injection of vitality, that may not, in truth, be that different than the treatment a lot of less know names have been doing in bars for years but the fact is it is Bruce Springsteen doing this. That and the obvious enthusiasm and understanding he has for the songs and their enduring context. His voice is vital to the way he gives these songs a new lease on life, that and the fact that he has surrounded himself with a group of musicians equally enthused by the songs and their timeless sound. The accompanying DVD also reveals some of that integral community sense of understanding. Whether this should not be viewed as a side-road, as opposed to a directional shift remains to be seen, but for now enjoy this for what it is, a damn fine album.

Southern Culture On The Skids *Double Wide and Live* Yep Roc

One of the most interesting of the independent labels is Yep Roc with a diverse yet loosely roots orientated roster that operates with the kind of spirit that Stiff Records did in their heyday. With two of my favourite bands, The Sadies and Th' Legendary Shack*Shakers, on the label we can add a third with the release of this live album, in a limited edition pop-up gatefold sleeve. The trio of Mary Huff - bass and vocals, Dave Hartman - drums and vocals and Rick Miller - guitar and vocals, make a sound that is bigger than the sum of it's parts, full of white trash aesthetic, twang and take-out tunes. This is fast, furious and fun. The special edition has an additional three songs and an enhanced section with live footage. All in all a great little package and some life-affirming, smile-on-the-face music. The SCOTS well, write some great tunes and don't take themselves too seriously - what more could you ask?

Various Artists *The Pilgrim* New West*

This is not the first tribute to Kris Kristofferson but it is arguably the best. The argument about such projects runs that if the are too reverential and stick close to the original then what's the point? If they throw away the plans completely they lose the plot. But in truth it comes down to whether you enjoy what you're listening to. If they're good they emphasise the power of the artist in question while reminding you how good the songs were even seen in a different light. While I can't say anything here is a disaster there is much to recommend. Gretchen Wilson offers a untypical but excellent reading of *Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down* which highlight her strength as a vocalist. Rodney Crowell delivers an untypical (of late) straight country version of *Come Sundown*. Marta Gomez's spanish language take on *The Circle* is another strong version. And there are many more highlights over the 17 tracks including Patty Griffin, Todd Snider, Emmylou Harris and Bruce Robison and Kelly Willis. In fact I have to say of late there have been more welcome and well thought-out tributes than not, especially when they are helmed by savvy independents like New West.

Guy Clark *Workbench Songs* Dualtone

A new album, a new label. Mr Clark is back and in good form. Guy Clark makes music that seems as familiar and comfortable as his worn denim shirt. These new songs have a direct line to his earlier albums. He observes, and articulates the detail of ordinary life and times, but he does so in a timeless fashion. It seems to be deceptively simple but in truth takes a lot of work and thought to distill the tales right down to their essence. He is accompanied, as he has been of late, by Verlon Thompson, who with Chris Latham and Guy produced the album. Thompson

duets with him on the final traditional song *Diamond Joe*. Aside from a simple but telling version of Townes Van Zandt's *No Lonesome Tune* the songs are co-writes with a variety of tunesmiths who range from Chuck Mead and Rodney Crowell to Darrell Scott and Thompson. The backings are excellent and fitting and range from guitar and mandolin to full band settings. Many are destined to join Clark's canon of well loved songs, including *Out In The Parking Lot*, *Expose* and *Walkin' Man* but nothing here is below par for one of the finest songwriters working today.

Kieran Kane, Kevin Welch and Fats Kaplin *Lost John* Dean Compass

The Dead Reckoners, or at least part of that partnership return with an acoustic album that finds Kane and Welch delivering alternative songs as lead vocalist with Kaplan in his usual role as the indispensable multi-instrumentalist. The title song is traditional, and they also cover Willie Dixon's *Mellow Down Easy*. The other songs are largely from the writers in various combinations of partners. The stand-outs include Welch on *Heaven Now*, the co-vocals on John Hadley and Dave Olney's *Postcard From Mexico*, that features some cutting electric guitar from Fats. The redemptive simplicity of *I Can't Wait* is another highlight. Fans of the two songsmiths and the Dead Reckoning collective will find much to enjoy and savour while we await (hopefully) a new solo album from each of them. For both are singers and songwriters of quality and reality.

Pacific Ocean Fire *From The Station To The Church We Are Under The Same Stars* Sorted

The title should let you know we are not dealing with hardcore honky-tonk here. The band who recently released a split 10" ep (with Don's Mobile Barbers) meet at a much busier crossroads. This is one which, on occasions, can be called country but in truth has a much wider brief and reach. It is atmospheric and melodic but does not exactly follow the linear projection of pop. A track like *Honky Tonkin' Troubled Blues* is arresting but not the hardwood floor filler the title might suggest. *Leaving Dusty Footprints* is a subtle slide guitar and trumpet led soliloquy with nicely contrasted guest vocals from Anjy Hall. The harder sonics of *An Arrow For Yr Heart* offers a different view of their layered soundscapes which are there to be explored at will for the more adventurous among you.

Brady Harris *North Hollywood Skyline* Lampshade*

The clues are staring you in the face on the cover of this new Brady Harris album, When you see a Hohner violin bass featured there is an immediate connection to it's most famous player. This is an album that finds common ground between two musical points; The Beatles and The Burritos, those flying brothers and their most famous member - Gram Parsons. However that starting point leads to some very enjoyable music that adds up to more than those two influences. The end of the day it comes down the quality of the songs and the performance. And the evidence here is that as a writer, singer and player Harris scores well on all three points. Most of the instruments are played by Harris and he also produced and mixed the album. The work of Tucker Jackson on pedal steel guitar is also a crucial part of the mixture giving several songs that crossover country music element. Recorded in the North Hollywood of it's title, it opens with *Get The Losers Out* a song that sits on the pop side, sort of one man ELO. This is followed by *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo* a song which, subject wise, and with it's steel guitar embellishments sits equidistant between our two reference points. One song that is delivered with more than a certain amount of irony is the jaunty *We're Alt.Country (And You're Not)*. A very enjoyable album that will satisfy listeners on a number of bases. The sort of album that fans of earlier Neal Casal albums would enjoy.

Josh Ritter *The Animal Years* Independent

Ritter has become an artist who has gained an extensive and enthusiastic following here in Ireland. This has been achieved by regular visits, good music and by working with a local label on the ground. His music is singer/songwriter with loose roots overtones that is delivered by Ritter in a setting enhanced by a strong, sympathetic band, the production of Brian Deck and the expressive voice of Ritter and his layered, poetic writing. The songs that work best for this listener include *Monster Ballads*, the more uptempo *Lillian, Egypt* and the atmospheric, largely unaccompanied *Idaho*. It is a package that has connected here in Ireland and is beginning to make greater inroads back home in America. This album will no doubt appeal to his fans and also to those who like their songwriters subtle and sensual.

The Handsome Family *Last Days Of Wonder* Independent*

The latest album from the Handsome Family, Brett and Rennie Sparks is a gem. I always look forward to the combination of Brett's deep voice and Rennie's always imaginative and captivating wordplay. The music has been moving in ever more perfected circles as Brett's skill at putting the music together the soundscapes increases. There are some guests adding pedal steel, musical saw, banjo, jazz guitar and trombone, while brother Darrell adds some harmonies over the tracks that the duo have assembled, Rennie plays some banjo, ukulele and autoharp as well as taking lead vocal on *Hunter Green*. Some tracks like *Flapping Your Broken Wings* have a more "country" sound but all are enhanced by their dreamlike qualities, the musical equivalent of a Cohn Brothers movie. The Handsome Family are unique and they continue to make music that is as intriguing as it is inventive. Make the *Last Days Of Wonder* a first port of call.

Linda McLean *No Language* Bongo Beat*

Canadian artist McLean treads a similar path to Kathleen Edwards in that she makes roots orientated rock music with her husband Andy, who co-writes the music and plays the guitars. McLean writes the words and sings in a strong, gritty voice that delivers these songs of displacement, relationships and the inevitability of change. The four piece band offer some robust roots revivalism. Guitar, bass, drums and keyboards all emphasize the core emotions that underpin these songs. The album as a whole feels good and delivers the kind of strong statement of intent that you don't often recognize on a first acquaintance. McLean is continuing a tradition of strong female music exponents rather than inventing or delivering anything new, but she does it with a sense of genuine emotion that transcends any language.

Ray Wylie Hubbard *Snake Farm* Sustain

A new label for his latest album, Sustain is distributed by Universal, so it may mean that Hubbard's singular mix of blues, folk, rock and roots might be heard by more people. His success at the Midlands Music Festival shows that he can easily reach a wider audience, if he just gets exposed to more listeners. Co-produced by Ray Wylie with Gurf Morlix it has that hard-edged, tightly focused group sound with Morlix, Rick Richards on drums and George Reiff on bass, alongside Hubbard on guitar and vocals as the core band. The songs are observations on the oddities and outsiders that offer insight and intrigue. Those acquainted with Ray Wylie Hubbard's work will know what to expect, and those coming to him new are starting at a high point where he has refined his sound and musical statement to something as sharp as snake fangs. This is old age blues for a new dark age, sonically gritty but full of humanity. It's time to visit the reptile house. www.raywylie.com

Michael Ubaldini *Empty Bottles & Broken Guitar Strings* Blackwater

Working in a classic rock 'n' roll mode this 20 track album follows up his *Avenue Of The 10 Cent Heart* release from last year.

It shows Ubaldini as a prolific, if defined writer. In truth these songs stand on the strength of the songs as the music is draws on music of bygone ears. Often you are reminded of one great band or another, but that doesn't distract from it being a well put together and enjoyable album. Ubaldini leads from the front with fervent vocals and fiery guitar. He is also producer, arranger as well as writer of all the songs. To emphasize his roots the three songs that open the album were recorded at Sun Studios in Memphis. One song *Don't Say Goodbye* features Brian Setzer and Lee Rocker of the Stray Cats so it's not hard to realize where his musical heart lies. However this is not a retro album, Ubaldini filters these influences through a bedrock of music that includes everything that has caught his attention over the last few years. He is also capable of scathing comment as in *The Seventh Trumpet* or the more reflective, pedal steel underpinned closing song *The Unfaithful Wife*. www.rocknrollpoet.com

Jeff Black *Tin Lily* Dualtone

Jeff Black is one of those writers who can look at himself, or the character he's writing about, and give you some idea of the insecurity and doubt that we can all feel. The songs here are reflective and rounded. Black has produced this album and the musicians deliver some restrained performances that match the mood of the songs. Top notch players like Dave Roe, Dave Jacques, Sam Bush and Kenny Vaughn give Black's songs a range of setting from the subtle to the more raucous, as in *Libertine* or *These Days*. This is the kind of album that is worth getting acquainted with as it rewards frequent playing and reveals more of its heart over time. And as such it is the kind of album that often gets ignored as it is not operating on an instant reaction level. Jeff Black is a good singer/songwriter who, like many of his contemporaries exists outside the mainstream, but produces work of lasting quality, as finely wrought as a tin lily or a real one.

Various Artists *Louisana Hayride* Proper

Part of Proper's budget four CD box set series, this features artist who appeared on the Louisiana Hayride radio show. The tracks though are not live transcriptions, but rather contemporary recordings. The recognised names include Hank Williams Snr, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash but what makes these collections worthwhile for many is the inclusion of the many tracks from lesser know artists who would otherwise remain largely unheard. Tex Grimsley, Billy Wallace, Hoot and Curley and Carolyn Bradshaw are just a few who sit alongside a selection of singers who, though already anthologised, may not be as familiar as the bigger names. They include Red Sovine, Kitty Wells and Carl Perkins. With 111 tracks over the four CD's there is bound to be something that everyone will love. The sound quality varies across the tracks but nothing is less than listenable. *Louisana Hayride* comes with an informative 68 page booklet written by Adam Komorowski that completes what is a welcome package for fans of hillbilly music.

Reckless Kelly *Reckless Kelly Was Here* Sugar Hill

This Austin based band has been around for some time. Their first album, with a slightly different line-up, was released in 1997 (a previous live album, Acoustic, was recorded at Stubbs as the title suggest in unplugged mode). This is the full electric show, featured over 2 CDs and a DVD. The latter features 15 songs with an additional song and two studio tracks on the CDs. Reckless Kelly play roots rock that recalls Steve Earle's mid-period output as well as long gone bands like the Cactus Brothers. The songs are delivered with energy and drive and come from all of the band's albums. Most are new to this album which makes it even more of a must-have for band fans. Main singer Willy Braun, is also the writer of most of the songs, solo or with other members and friends. Other songs include *1952 Vincent Black Lightning* by Richard Thompson, *Guacamole* a Freddie Fender co-write, as well as *Seven Nights In Eire*, co-written with Pinto

Bennett and (on the CD) an extended version of The Beatles' *Revolution*. The whole thing is well recorded and the DVD captures the excitement and atmosphere of what was a great night. Reckless Kelly are a hi-energy band that deliver a well-rounded and clearly well received show. Worth checking out for a little of that Austin nights ambience.

The Duhks *Migrations* Sugar Hill

The Canadian quintet are back and sounding more assured and alluring. This time out production is handled by Tim O'Brien and Gary Paczosa and the sound seems both warmer and well-travelled. Combining a lot of influence, the songs cover a wide range of writers and styles from traditional songs such as the gospel of *Moses, Don't Get Lost* to Tracy Chapman's *Mountain O' Things* and singer Jesse Harvey's own *Out Of The Rain*. Harvey is an expressive vocalist who gives the band a vital instrument that sits alongside their finely honed skills on a host of instruments. Not that the other members, who take turns as lead vocals, are slouches but listen to *Who Will Take My Place*, a song about Michael Collins written by Dan Frechette, for proof. The Duhks are the welcome side of the cutting edge of acoustic music. Beyond bluegrass, on their migrations they have visited many shores and picked up a lot of influences, learned from them, and have made their own music stronger for it. The Duhks rohk.

Anne McCue *Koala Motel* Cooking Vinyl*

A welcome return for McCue with her new album, which she has co-produced with Dusty Wakeman. Wakeman's Mad Dog studio has long been a centre for roots music on the west coast. The accomplished band includes Wakeman on bass alongside McCue and keyboard player and drummer David Raven. The songs, other than a cover of Tony Joe White's *As The Crow Flies*, are written by McCue, solo or with a writing partner. The sound is fuller, more relaxed and mature with McCue delivering more assured vocals. She is front and centre on that count even when such notable guests as Lucinda Williams, John Doe, Jim Lauderdale and Heart's Nancy Wilson join her. Her electric guitar skills are also a strong part of her armory and while they are always controlled here, supporting the songs, they form a backbone to such songs as *Hellfire Raiser*. The acoustic setting on *Coming To You* is equally compelling. The album, for this writer, ends on a very high note with the atmospheric *Jesus Blood* - a terse song of clerical abuse. *Shivers* has strong vocal with McCue's and Jim Lauderdale's voices intertwining on a song that questions a vital relationship. There's a funkiness to her cover of *As The Crow Flies* that suits the song's source. The album ends with the guitar-led instrumental title track on what is a strong and successful album that places McCue as a definite one to watch, and to listen to.

Hellwood *Chainsaw Of Life* Munich

Now here's an album that could be said to be the sophisticated step-father of the above album. The sources may be similar but the execution is more layered and thoughtful. Hellwood is a project put together by Jim White, Johnny Dowd and Willie B and some friends. The songs, written by all three, in various combinations, are generally sweeter than Dowd's solo work and less studio enhanced than White's recent work, but they work well on many levels. In some ways they reflect the visual elements that were explored in the recent *Searching For The Wrong Eyed Jesus* DVD, the film directed by Andrew Douglas, that featured both Dowd and White. *Chainsaw Of Life* is an appropriately rough-cut view of an often ignored underbelly of existence. But the way the songs work is often as complex as life itself, taking the rough with the smooth. The two singers both contrast and blend their voices to enhance the overall delivery. They are joined, on a number of tracks by Kim Sherwood-Caso for an added female dimension. Hellwood may well prove to be a combination that will prove to be greater

than the sum of its parts, as it is an album that is eminently listenable, if a little odd by mainstream terms. Hellwood however, I would imagine, have little interest in compromising their work for commercial gain. Those who have enjoyed both artists albums will doubtless be compelled to listen to this slice of (chainsawed) life.

George Byrne *Foreign Water* Laughing Outlaw

No it's not our own beloved journalist but rather a low-key melodic troubadour from Australia who has made an album full of bitter sweet songs that could be described as alt-country but are less defined than that. He uses pedal steel for atmosphere, but equally uses a cello to similar effect, often together. This is the kind of album that could well find its own niche with an audience much as the likes of Josh Ritter has done here in Ireland. These songs are growers and close listening is rewarded. Byrne has a strong voice and his songs are not linear tales but reflections of a personal viewpoint, do not scream at you, rather they whisper at you to listen. Which is not to say that they don't on occasion rock out, as a track like *Tongue Tied* does indeed do. But, for the most part, the delivery is quiet and thoughtful. He is joined on some songs by outside vocalists who harmonize together in a subtle but effective way. *On My Mind* offers an element of twang in the guitar and pedal steel, while *Up In Ova* uses a banjo and guitar in a more stripped back way, as does the closing *Paint It Grey*, to show that Byrne's songs are suited to many settings. A persuasive and well-packaged album.

Maria McKee *Live-Acoustic Tour 2006* Cooking Vinyl

An album that reminds you just what a strong vocalist and writer McKee is. She mixes songs from various parts of her career alongside such covers as *The World Is Not My Home* and Love's *Orange Skies*, which was written by her half-brother Brian McClean. You get *A Good Heart* her song that was Fergal Sharkey's big solo hit. There are some between song introductions that are part of the event. The advance promo copy has no information but the simplicity of the delivery, just guitar, piano and voices is striking in its intimacy. This will go down well with those who have followed her career since the days of Lone Justice..

Tracy Huffman *Ever Notice A Crow* Boronda

West coast alt.country that owes more to the Stones side of the Gram Parsons heritage than to the Bakersfield side. This is rock-swagger mixed with roots righteousness. Huffmans high lonesome voice cuts through Charlie McGovern's rough but right production. The band, all part of that California alt-country scene, includes fellow artists Mike Stinson and Kip Boardman. This is a warm, intimate, relaxed affair that allows the apparent looseness to be a part of the overall charm.. Songs like *Drugs* suggest a reason for the looseness, while there is a softer side to in the questioning consideration of *Somebody's Buried There*. A planet away from major label gloss and all the better for it.

Various Artists *Why The Hell Not... The Songs Of Kinky Friedman* Sustain

A compilation that takes tracks from the previously released *Pearls In The Snow* with new tracks from Kevin Fowler, Charlie Robison, Jason Boland, Todd Snider, Kelly Willis with Bruce Robison and finally Ray Benson and Reckless Kelly. A good line up which, with ten tracks, is not as generous as the seventeen on *Pearls*, but is a testament to Friedman's songwriting talents and the interperative skills of the artists. So why the hell not... indeed.

Bobby Bare *The Moon Was Blue* Dualtone

A welcome return to recording for Bobby Bare fans, one that his son was involved in. It highlights Bare's smooth voice on a number of covers that, while they may not appeal to me personally, will be welcome to many. The songs go from such standards as *Love Letters In The Sand*, *Are You Sincere?* and *Harvest*

Moon to more recent songs like *Lucy Jordan*. All are given relaxed easy listening country/politician arrangements that work well with Bare's authoritative vocal. A highlight would be his reading of *Easy To Forget*, which has some nice discordant sound underlying the song arrangement. It's good to see a veteran performer linked with a discerning and more caring label to make contemporary albums.

Tresa Jordon *Tresa Jordon* South River Road

This is one of those albums that would sit comfortably beside the work of Alison Krauss or Rhonda Vincent. It is an acoustic album but one that moves in and around and beyond pure bluegrass definitions. Jordon has an expressive and strong voice and has co-written seven of the 10 songs featured. There is also some strong musical talent at work here that includes Wanda Vick on a wide variety of instruments, Upright bass player Barry Bales, guitarist David Cleveland and drummer Ken Lewis. The songs have titles like *Country High*, *Angels Cry* and *I Turn To Country* that reflect an mind-set and attitude that is resolutely positive and largely rural. The traditional gospel song *Ain't No Grave* is given a uptempo treatment in keeping with the overall spirit of the album. Given the right exposure there is no doubt Tresa Jordon could become another crossover contender.

Karen Taylor Good *How Many Women* Insight

Judging from the cover pictures and the list of previous CD's Karen Taylor Good has been in the business a number of years. This is essentially a light acoustic country/bluegrass/folk based collection of songs written by Taylor Good and a host of co-writers. She has had success previously, as one picture is captioned *SESAC Songwriter of the Year*, but doesn't give a year. Taylor Good has a strong voice, and delivers her songs with conviction in a clear and considered fashion. Naturally a lot of the songs are from a strongly female perspective with, at times spiritual overtones in such songs as *God's Refrigerator* and also deal with personal relationships: *How Many Women* tells a straying partner of the many different positive aspects of the woman he already has. Collin Raye and Walter Suhr both sing duets with Taylor Good. There is a bit of bite to the condemnation in *Bless His Heart*. I have to admit that this isn't really my cup of tea but there are many who will enjoy what it has to offer. The featured band, which includes Jon Yudkin, are well able to give these songs a seasoned setting that is perfectly in tune with their needs. www.karentaylorgood.com

Warren Zanes *People That I'm Wrong For* Dualtone

Another of Dualtone's stable of singer/songwriters with some roots overtones as evidenced here on tracks like *Fool The Moon* which features some fine pedal steel from Jim Hoke, more noted for his horn playing which he adds elsewhere. Otherwise it moves in a more or less rock direction with the band delivering some sterling ensemble playing. And while it didn't connect with me too often songs like *Carrying Me/Carrying You* were strong as was the more dynamic *Ella's Arms*. Warren Zanes may find that I fall into the category of those that he is wrong for but there are many others for whom he might well be right for.

Sam Shinazzi *Stories You Wouldn't Believe* Laughing Outlaw
Another accomplished singer/songwriter with that "Outlaw" sound. Shinazzi plays with a tight band - guitar, bass drums and keyboards and delivers a sound that works within it's own context but never really goes beyond that. Nothing wrong with that but not one that stands out from the crowd. Try *The Drifter* as a example of Shinazzi at his best.

June Carter Cash *Keep On The Sunny Side* Columbia

This two CD retrospective of June Carter's recorded work runs from the Carter Family (recorded in 1939) and spans 64 years of work. It shows the humour and spirit of June Carter Cash and includes perhaps her best know song *Ring Of Fire*, as well as a number of tracks recorded with Johnny, one of three version of

the Carter classic *Keep On The Sunnyside*, the final track being the version she recorded in 2003 for her final album which was released on Dualtone. This is a well annotated collection with an essay from Holly Warren George and a reminiscence from Elvis Costello. June Carter Cash had a distinctive and very country voice and this set is as solid a collection as is readily available. It is a fine tribute to her strengths and individuality, as well as to her musical talent.

Johnny Cash & June Carter Cash *Duets* Legacy

Another in this ongoing back catalogue campaign is this new compilation of duets that opens with *It Ain't Me, Babe* (that featured in Walk The Line) as did the next track *Jackson*. There are fourteen other cuts from various stages in their career that show how strong a duet partnership they were. Well known songs like *Help Me Make It Through The Night* and *If I Were A Carpenter* sit alongside more traditional material like *Far Side Banks Of Jordan* and *The Pine Tree*. A welcome and useful collection that focuses on their vocal and emotional interplay.

The Dirty Truckers *Washed And Ready* Diorama

As you might expect from the name these guys are amped up and rough edged. A bass, drums, guitars, vocals quartet they add guest pedal steel and harmonic to round-things out occasionally. The songs are written by singer Tom Baker with one outside song and a tough cover of Nick Lowe's *Ragin' Eyes*. What you have here is a fiery bar band who rock out but can deliver subtler tones as in *Without A Sound*. Elsewhere songs like *Help You Ann* and *Heavy Metal Weekend* are as much hard rock as they are roots rock. Nothing wrong with that. To the casual listener, unfamiliar with them in a live context, this is not dissimilar to a number of other bands out there. They deliver what they're supposed to and as a such is a good calling card, but unless you come across it are unlikely to go looking for it.

Robinella Solace *For The Lonely* Dualtone

High on atmosphere this second album for Robinella is as removed from the her debut as her name is from the previous CC Stringband addendum. The sound here is built around the vocals and everything else sits around that. Not at all unpleasant, if a little samey after awhile. But given the right listening mood it will doubtless appeal. The playing is subtle but expressive and producer Doug Lancio (Patty Griffin) uses his instrumental palate well to evoke a feeling of light and shade from the more uptempo, pedal steel led *Oh So Sexy* to the much quieter moments like *Teardrops*. Not to everyone's taste but, for those who acquire it, it is likely to be repeated.

Burrito Deluxe *Disciples Of The Truth* Lina Chica

There have been a number of changes with the Burrito Deluxe line up since their *The Whole Enchilada* album, most notably the departure of Sneaky Pete Kleinow and Garth Hudson. But that hasn't stopped them coming up with a notable new album, with Carlton Moody continuing his role as lead singer. This is solid old school country-rock with spruce harmonies and top-notch playing, if at times lacking soul. The twelve songs range from ballads like *When The Summer's Over* to uptempo tracks like *Midnight At A Red Light*. This album will satisfy the many fans that they have made on recent visits to these shores, as well offering an introduction to anyone who comes across the band and is a curiosity about them and their links to the flying brothers variety. Times have changed, as has the music, but while the Deluxe version will never replace the Parsons/Hillman band they are building their own fan base.

Joel Plaskett *La De Da* MapleMusic

Plaskett played here as support to Kathleen Edwards and this is his latest release. A singer/songwriter, he has written all but one of the songs. The music ranges from a full band sound to simpler settings like that on *Lying On A Beach*. Lyrically Plaskett's songs take somewhat unconventional views of life and love. They are

full of unexpected sounds and arrangements that take his music beyond a simple roots setting. This makes the listener aware of the overall off-kilter nature of the process. There is an obvious talent at work here but I feel it's not one that everyone will take to. The album was recorded in 2004 in Mesa, Arizona which may or may not account for some of its direction. Plaskett is a Canadian artist and anyone who looks at that country's music scene will know how varied it can be, even in the roots context. For me it took a while to get a handle on it but more stripped songs like *Nina & Albert* or the closing *Love This Town* were more immediate and effective.

The Kickbacks *Model Stars* Peeled Label

Something of a thoughtful nature going on here. Producer and band member Steve Scott adds keyboards and programming to the overall sound to give some depth to vocalist and guitarist Tad Overbaugh's songs. They are melodic rock songs that are hooky and plucky. *Lazy Eye* has a good chorus and strong harmonies which help it have an instant appeal. That song is typical of the solid structures that the band have put in place. The Kickbacks sound like a roots band that have moved on and brought their sound to broader pastures in the way that Wilco have done. The synth sound that opens *I Crash Cars* is proof of that. The more acoustic take on *Jealous Of The Stars* looks more to a rootsier sound with pedal steel adding some nice touches. The Kickbacks are one of those indie bands who if they got a major label break could reach a wider audience, but for now they demonstrate that they write and play songs that exhibit a sense of structure and mobility. www.thekickbacks.com

Josh Turner *Your Man* MCA Nashville

Here is the second album from the deep-voiced Turner, whose debut album was one of the best things from a major label in recent times. His new album is again produced by Frank Rogers and while it doesn't quite top his debut it has some strong performances, starting with the opening Shawn Camp, John Scott Sherrill song *Would You Go With Me*, which has some effective acoustic playing blended with the electric instrumentation. Camp also turns up on three other songs including the humorous *Loretta Lynn's Lincoln*. Turner has an obvious affection for bluegrass and adds elements of that sound at several points, most noticeably on *Me and God* which features Dr Ralph Stanley and Diamond Rio. John Anderson add his voice to the somewhat dubious premise of *White Noise*. Bob McDill's *Lord Have Mercy On A Country Boy* is delivered well and is an album highlight on what is a very enjoyable offering and shows that in the right hands Music Row can deliver some solid, contemporary country music.

Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham *Live - Moments From This Theatre* Proper

Re-promoted to coincide with some live dates this album is a masterclass in understated soulful music. The duo play a whole bunch of classic songs they wrote together such as the opening *I'm Your Puppet* or *Cry Like A Baby* or the renowned songs that Penn wrote with Chips Moman, *Do Right Woman, Do Right Man* and *Dark End Of The Street*. Recorded in Belfast and Dublin as well as in the UK it has a warmth that is organic and real. The voices are not the best that have sung these songs but they sing them with a genuine spirit that makes them definite.

Cracker *Greenland* Cooking Vinyl

The sound of Cracker is increasingly more textured these days. There are lots of keyboards and synths blending with the pedal steel, violin and accordion sounds. The duo of David Lowery, the main songwriter, solo or with others and Johnny Hickman provide the central core to Cracker. Here the five piece is augmented by a host of additional players and singers like Mark Linkous, Caitlin Cary and David Immergluck. Greenland develops the Cracker sound of late over a bunch of memorable and enjoyable songs. They run from the quieter songs like *Fluffy Lucy*

to the full-on rockin' plea of *Gimme One More Chance* to a more treated *I'm So Glad She Ain't Never Coming Back*. Cracker play inventive, interesting and intelligent music that marks them out as a band to check-out at the earliest opportunity if you like roots tinged rock.

The Celophane Flower *In: Their Best Album So Far* Flower Productions

Can't qualify the title as I've not heard any of their other albums but this one falls into the alt. category - if anywhere. It is a multi-layered bitter-sweet dreamscape that uses a variety of instruments and harmonic voices to create a soft focus mood. These instruments range from strings, a French horn, flute and on one track bagpipes as well as pedal steel over the more usual instrumentation all of which gives the Swedish quartet, and guests, an unusual and individual sound. All the songs are sung in English and are written by band members Jim Bragde and Andy Hansson. They range from the delicate *Oh Brother* (nothing to do with the movie) songs like *Time Of My Life* which continues the mood of subtle harmonies and sounds, to the gentle, pedal steel led country rock of *2.am*. It's fair to say that the overall direction of the album is all in that quieter mode of introspective reflection. All of which makes for a rewarding experience and a band on the fringes, who will reward the attentive listener. www.celophaneflower.com

Grady *Y.U. So Shady* Self-Released

Texas hard rock trio with blues overtones. The traditional *Western Cowboy*, familiar to some listeners via Rory Gallagher, closes the album but the bulk of the material comes from guitarist and singer Grady Johnson. The songs are rough edged and battle hardened and will appeal to those who like it loud and direct. It's fun and it's furious with little let up and doubtless Grady are powerful live. Not really a Lonesome Highway band but one that may attract some attention for those who love Texas music of all sorts and sounds. www.shadygrady.net

Rascal Flatts *Me And My Gang* Lyric Street

A perfect example of Music Row product. Produced, played and pampered to perfection, it is essentially soft rock with the addition of some country instrumentation. On occasion, as with the joke turned into a song, *Backwards*, that instrumentation is more prominent and the song "feels" country. The songs are mainly from established writers with band members making contributions. Former artist Neil Thrasher has contributed several. The album has been co-produced by the band and veteran Dann Huff, and as I said it sounds as you would expect. Rascal Flatts are successful and represent, no doubt, for many the sound of country music today - all well and good but nothing here sustains or engages me. The thing is this is; not the country music that I love.

Frank Black *Fast Man Raider Man* Cooking Vinyl

Equally not country but coming from a more real place is the new double album from Frank Black. After the recent return of The Pixies this brings Black back to where his solo albums left off. One of the things that got me interested in this album was the involvement of Marty Brown, the country singer who had 3 albums on MCA and 1 on Hightone, a great singer and writer, he's been through some hard times and it is good to see him involved with music again. There are numerous other Nashville residents involved as well including Bobby Bare Jr., Billy Block, 'Cowboy' Jack Clement, Buddy Miller alongside such rock names as Simon Kirke, Jim Keltner and Al Kooper. Among other veteran players are Spooner Oldham, Billy Swan and Levon Helm who all lend a hand. But it is Black who is the focus. It is his voice upfront and while it has received some less than favourable comment from those more orientated to the Pixies sound, it is a lot more laid back and soulful. There are a couple of older songs from outside sources alongside the Black songs and as it is a double

CD of 27 tracks is somewhat spread out and rambling and requires some attention, but this is the sound of a man doing what he, and not the fans want. There is more than enough here to make it worth at least a lengthy listen.

The Stars Of Heaven *Sacred Heart Hotel & Speak Slowly* Independent

One of the great "lost" Irish bands who never achieved the rewards they should have. The final album *Speak Slowly* had many fans (though the band themselves were never happy with the end results - all detailed in the extensive liner notes by the band and admirers that accompany each CD) and though it has certain tell-tale late 80's production sounds the songs and the band's performance make it worthy of it's flawed but favourite album status. Their harmony laden guitar driven songs were labeled often as falling into the B section, that is Byrds and Big Star. While that gives a starting point they went their own way fuelled by the writing strengths of Stan Erraught and Stephen Ryan. *The Sacred Heart Hotel* album is made up of some sessions for the John Peel Show (Peel was a champion) and some studio recording made in 1986. They still have a freshness and unspoilt air that anyone who likes that kind of melodic guitar pop/rock or student of Irish music or, in fact, anyone who just like good music should hear to these albums.

Various Artists *Graciously-A Gulf Relief* compilation Funzalo

The title pretty much gives the *raison d'être* for this album. Some of the names that I already knew included Steve Wynn, Calexico, Richmond Fontaine, John Doe and Friends of Dean Martinez. Wynn's *Riverside* sets the tone both lyrically and musically with the full string arrangement give the song a dramatic setting. *Griptape Heart* is similar to more recent outing that Calexico have delivered. Luca are rockier with their uptempo *Shadow Painting*. *Devotchka* are rhythmic and right-angled. *The Gits* from Richmond Fontaine is another astute observation and celebration of the local scene, well up to their usual standard. Howe Gelb and Scout Niblett offer a somewhat off-kilter upper registered version of the garage classic *I Want Candy* that also includes snatches of *Who Do You Love?* all to a Bo Diddley beat. Likewise John Doe gives *Baby's In Black* a arresting bluesy version. The Friends Of Dean Martinez offer a steel guitar led take on *Moon River* that is typical of their desert latin lounge laid-back attitude. A worthy album for a worthy cause.

Grant-Lee Phillips *ninteeneightsies* Cooking Vinyl

As the title indicates these are songs that Phillips has chosen from those named decades, which he delivers in a rootsy stripped-down fashion playing the majority of the instruments himself but occasionally using drums, upright bass and violin as additional support. None of the chosen songs would seem to lend themselves to this setting but, in reality, do. Joy Division's *The Eternal* is particularly successful, as is Echo and The Bunnymen *The Killing Moon*, always a great song. Less of a leap is *So*, Central Rain (*I'm Sorry*) an early R.E.M song. He closes the album with solid versions of The Cure's *Boys Don't Cry* and The Smiths *Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me*. This is an album that has an underlying subtly that delivers itself up over several plays and is one that highlights the versatile, if understated, vocal strength of Grant-Lee Phillips and the finely tuned, often acoustic-based arrangements he has re-interpreted these songs with. One for the curious and the committed.

The Agnostic Mountain Gospel Choir *Fighting And Onions* Self-Released

As The name may suggest this is a harsh and rough-edged take on old-time acoustic music from a bare knuckles four piece. The songs are a mix of their own songs and arrangements of titles by blues singers like Skip James and Son House. The arrangements

are basic and the delivery is never troubled by finesse. Those who like their music raw or who like an artist like Scott H Biram should find something to favour here. This is music taken back to its most primitive roots. Titles like *Lousy Drunk* and *Vinegar and Piss* or *Death Don't Have No Mercy* might give you an additional clue as to the audio content. The percussion often takes its shape from stuck metallic objects, under some rudimentary banjo plucking and sand-paper vocals. In the right mood it has a primal power and is effective, however I think it may well be a little "purist" for many. Each to his (or her) own.
www.theagnostics.com

Joan Baez *Bowery Songs* Proper

Another person still in good and distinctive voice is Joan Baez and this live album finds her choosing songs from throughout her long career. Opening with the unaccompanied *Finlandia* she then utilises her undersated but atmospheric band. The songs range from Dylan's, *Farewell, Angelina* and *Seven Curses* to Steve Earle's *Jerusalem* and *Sisters in Washington*. As well as such classics as *Carrickfergus* and Guthrie's *Deportees*. All prove that Baez, as well as retaining her voice, has lost none of her awareness or human understanding. All of which makes this a fine live recording, her first in ten years, as well as an ideal place to reacquaint oneself with her interpretative skills and singular vision.

Josh Lederman Y Los Diablos *Let's Waste Another Evening* Nine Mile

Despite being another band with Pogues comparisons I enjoyed this accordion fuelled collection. Dubbed in some quarters "the kings of Irish-Jewish folk punk" this New England band work because the balance is shifted somewhat in favour of American roots music rather than just celtic connections. But on a cut like the instrumental *Te Portiki Tancuja*, with it's clinking bottles sound one can too easily see the link. Likewise the traditional tale of the Newry Highwayman takes a similar tack but the sheer exuberance of the performance wins you over. Lederman's own songs, like the title track, the opening *Another Lovely June* or *Will I Miss The City?* are all full of characters, drinking and late night revelry. The seven member band undoubtedly give a great night out and in the cold light of the studio also acquaint themselves fairly well.

The Peasall Sisters *Home To You* Dualtone

After appearing in *O Brother*, and scoring in the cute stakes the sisters release their latest and have obviously grown up since that movie's big moment. The music is still rooted in an approximation of acoustic old-time music, but producer John Carter Cash has surrounded them with some contemporary elements. Some tracks feature drums, but thankfully, in this context they remain unobtrusive. Hannah Peasall takes the lead on most of the songs, her sisters Leah and Sarah also lead up on a number of tracks and then there some that feature all three in harmony. On a positive note some of the more appealing songs are written by the girls, Sarah's title cut and *Logtown* stand-up well against such classic songs as *Angel Band*, *Fair And Tender Ladies* and *Carrickfergus*, in arrangements by Sarah and Hannah. The potential to makes some compelling music is there even if nothing here can truthfully fall into that category. It is nonetheless an enjoyable and listenable album with a broad appeal. The acapella closing track, *Where No One Stands Alone* shows the potential power of their voices. A little time and maturity will do wonders, and they should have plenty of that.

Brooks and Dunn *Hillbilly Deluxe* Arista

Ah Brooks and Dunn, the boot scootin' boys; how I hated the association with line-dancing in my purist days. These days they are sounding a lot more "country" than many of those around them and have an obvious love of the music. So despite borrowing a title from Dwight Yoakam this is their best album yet, with Ronnie Dunn proving that he is an excellent singer. I still

think that they have a more solid country traditional album in them as this is still powered by the need to impress country radio's narrow view of what's acceptable and what's not. The duo, with Tony Brown, have managed to produce an album that finds a balance between genre and radio geneffluction. It opens with something of a statement in *Play Something Country* and runs through to the closing Darrell Brown/Radney Foster co-write, the reflective but hopeful ballad *Again*. Half the songs are written by Ronnie with various partners and there's three co-written by Brooks. It is Dunn's *Believe* that delivers the most powerful vocal here. A slow building soulful song about leaving a small town but not it's values. So fair play to them for getting back to something more solid and worthwhile.

Rosanne Cash King's Record Shop Legacy

One of the best solo albums Rosanne Cash ever released, and one of her more country outings, is now available again in a remastered expanded version. Produced by Rodney Crowell it features a wide palate that included not only country, but also folk and rock elements played by a focused and talented set of players who included guitarists Stuart Smith and Billy Walker Jr, as well as keyboard player Barry Beckett. The songs that dealt on occasion with the difficulties of marriage included some from Cash herself and some insightful interpretations of songs by John Hiatt (*The Way We Make A Broken Heart*), Rodney Crowell (*I Don't Have To Crawl*) as well as her father's *Tennessee Flat Top Box*. All reflected the more open mood of Nashville in the late '80's and are well worth revisiting. The outtake 707, with John Hiatt on background vocals, and two live cuts, are tough-booted bonuses.

Johnny Cash The 2 Classic Prison Concerts Legacy

Amid the slew of re-issues and compilations comes this pairing of The Folsom and San Quentin expanded albums. Both are essential Cash and should be welcome to anyone who recently discovered early Cash via the *Walk The Line* movie. Alongside the Sun era compilations these offer a foundation for any Cash collection

Van Morrison Pay The Devil Exile

The institution that is Van Morrison takes on an album of country covers, plus 3 original songs. In his own highly indetifiable style. The backing utilizes some fine players from the UK scene, many of whom have played a similar role with Nick Lowe. These include Geraint Watkins on keyboards, Bob Loveday on fiddle, Bobby Irwin on drums as well as Paul Godden on pedal steel and Mick Green on guitar. The end result is so distinctly and individually Van Morrison that his regular fans need not worry. The backings and songs will be familiar enough that country fans, who may not necessarily also be Morrison fans, will also enjoy them. The playing throughout is strong and Morrison, who some feel can dominate a song on occasion, has an obvious affection for these songs and so delivers a strong vocal performance, perhaps his best in years. Having already received rave reviews in some of the country press, this is likely to be seen as one of his career highlights and one that finds him at the top of his game.

Rhonda Towns I Wanna Be Loved By You Dawn

A strong singer making her debut, Rhonda Towns is an African-American, with a good feel for the music. She worked with the late Jim Cotton as producer, as well as with two other reknowned Nashville names Harold Shedd and Norro Wilson. Towns also had a solid session team that included Hargus "Pig" Robbins, Pete Wade and Sonny Garrish. The end result is smooth, fluid mainstream country that highlights Towns' voice on a bunch of outside songs from a cover of the Dobie Gray co-write *Slow Rain* to the telling inclusion of her version of the *Lord's Prayer*, an unaccompanied performance that exemplifies Towns' strong Christian commitment. However with due

respect to that side of her performance it would have been good to balance that with something more gritty. The songs here are inspirational odes to positivity. *Plenty More Love* is a good example of that exuberance working well in a catchy upbeat way. Towns will no doubt appeal to the current mood that prevails in certain quarters in America at the moment, and it is good to have another African America making country music.

Perry Keyes Meter Laughing Outlaw

Laughing Outlaw has done much to bring Australian roots music to a wider audience over the last few years. Their output is a mix of roots and alt.country that owes a lot to Americana but has it's own regional stance. Here Sydney based singer/songwriter Keyes releases a double CD of self-composed songs that recall the sort of thing that Graham Parker has been doing of late. These are songs about the dark and light of life in a city. His four piece band is augmented by a full keyboard sound. The music is muscular and direct and the songs strong, even if the overall sound is a touch generic. Perry Keyes has a voice that holds your attention and songs that are about real people. Well worth a listen if you like big sound Springsteen or roots rock in general.