



volume 2 issue 9 / online version number 3 / 2008

LONESOME HIGHWAY

BLANCHE
TH' LEGENDARY SHACK*SHAKERS
MOOT DAVIS
MALCOLM HOLCOMBE
THE HACIENDA BROTHERS
MARY GAUTHIER
KEVIN DEAL
ANDY FAIRWEATHER LOW
JD SOUTHER



BLANCHE

In the fair city of Detroit, nestled among the garage-rock nooks and country crannies, lurks the music of Blanche. Husband and wife Dan and Tracee Miller trade intense and haunting vocals over an uneasy sea of pedal steel, banjo, raw guitar sounds, and sparse, driving drumming. The moods created in the songs seem to define Blanche. Some songs are sad and pretty, while others have a powerful, spooky feel. The melodies trick you into singing along with tales of superstitions, garbage picking, fading trust, and feelings of lost hope. The sound combines the intense desperation of the Gun Club, the sincere sadness of the Carter Family, and the creepy playfulness of Lee Hazlewood

Intro taken from the biography on the Blanche website which is well worth a visit and a wonderful design. www.blanchemusic.com

INTERVIEW BY STEVE RAPID | PHOTOGRAPHY BY RONNIE NORTON

Tell us what the secret of Little Amber Bottles is?

Well Tracee wrote that song so that's more for her. I think you can find the answers to little amber bottles in different ways, because they can be medication, something that helps you, or you can look to little amber bottles for the wrong reasons. It's whichever way you use them. I think people rely on medication too much.

How long have the band been working on getting the album out?

We recorded it down in Nashville in Mark Never's studio. He's got a nice little house where he's recorded Will Oldham, Andrew Bird, Calexico and a bunch of people that we really liked. We really liked the feeling down there and we wanted to get out of Detroit. We all have our families and everything but we wanted to get out of the city for a while and the environment there really lent itself to what we wanted to do. It was a warm sounding board and Mark has a really great feeling for music. We started out recording and then we did some more with Feeny in his studio in Detroit and we mixed it there. I think it worked out well but it was supposed to come out last fall. We had problems the record label in America, V2, but we're glad it's finally out over here (on Loose).

Is it difficult to get everyone's schedules together to tour or record as you all have other involvements?

Yes, we all have other things going on. Tracee's a painter. I do some acting and stuff. Feeny's running a studio and producing bands and Little Jack is busy with all of his musical endeavours. He's doing a lot of really great stuff. He just worked with Karen from the Yeah, Yeah, Yeahs for a *Where The Wild Things Are*. It's a soundtrack from a book. Then he has the Racentours and The Greenhornes. He's always busy. We just figure out a week when we can all tour together.

Feeny on the pedal steel and his singing. That's what is most important that overall sound, everyone bringing what they have to it.

But you have done some solo shows?

Well every once in awhile I do it. I think I've done three. It's not that good.

Has Europe recognised the uniqueness of Blanche more than in the US?

I think so because we have played more over here. I think also that people are more open to things that don't fit into easy categories. In America they want you to really rock out or be more traditional country or bluegrass and to play it completely straight. So for us and bands like 16 Horsepower or the Handsome Family, people with a country influence I think people are more open to it over here.

Blanche draw from those traditional sources but also from everything else that has been around since including your punk background would that be a correct assumption?

Everyone has talked about that a lot. That mix of punk rock and old time country music and blues music. Old Folk music has that feeling. It's about getting the emotion of the song. For us when we write a song and everyone puts their parts in then it just feels pretty natural. We have a sound that just fills itself out in an organic way. We don't have to force it to say well "this song should sound like more this way or that" and some songs like *I Can't Sit Down*, which is a cover and was from a more traditional source. I love punk rock and there are so many elements to that, and I would also love to do an album that sounded like Jimmie Rodgers or The Carter Family



IF YOU TAKE A LOT OF SIMPLE THINGS AND
MESS AROUND WITH THE ARRANGEMENT YOU
CAN CREATE SOMETHING REALLY BEAUTIFUL

How has the acting been going for you?

It's been really great. I always like doing it. I was really lucky with *Walk The Line* because I got to play one of my real... I don't know, idols I suppose. For most people, well most guitar players love Jimmy Page or Jimi Hendrix or somebody. But for me, and I love people who play simple, that's what Luther Perkins was all about. He had a beautiful real simple elegance to his playing. Maybe that's because I'm not an aficionado and know all these scales. I just know what sounds good to me.

Blanche is almost built on layers of simply structured playing...

That's how we started the band. We wanted to find something for everyone to do. Lisa really didn't know how to play drums, Tracy was just learning how to play bass and sing. Feeny had never played pedal steel. The original banjo player Patch Boyle, it was the same kind of thing for him. So if you take a lot of simple things and mess around with the arrangement you can create something really beautiful. But it was when we started recording that we learnt what our band could really sound like and what the best parts of it where. Obviously there's not a lot of solos, it's about keeping it simple and building layers upon layers.

How do you write the songs?

I come up with most of the main ideas. Then Little Jack did a song that he wrote called *Oh Death, Where Is Thy Sting*, he had always loved that title from the Bible. It's a really sad song. It's funny in that he had to miss a show a couple of months ago, he was out in California doing stuff for that soundtrack, so Lisa said "can I sing it?" She did sing it and it was really beautiful. She was feeling not so great that day and that added to it. But for me to just play the songs on an acoustic guitar that doesn't represent Blanche at all. That feeling is so important with

but it wouldn't be a true representation of what we're about. That's because we have these other things that really inspire us too. I think the key is to take those things that inspire you and keep the emotion and then build on it. But I think that a lot of more traditionally-minded people who love the Carter Family would hate Blanche, yet equally some people who love the Carter Family would love it as it, is genuine.

Is it frustrating that there is a resistance to your music in the usual channels?

Actually I'm surprised at how many people have been open to hearing it. Our original idea when we started the band was to put out a 7" single in Detroit and tour locally. We're not spring chickens. But when we found out that Loose might want to put it out in the UK we were surprised. They said "do you want to tour" we said yeah! So it surprising to me because when I listen to Blanche or when we come up with an idea for a song my though is no one's going to like this, we will and maybe a few of our friends. That's kind of how we write songs, we do what we would want to hear.

Would you like to go out on a big support tour?

I think so. I would love to open for someone big. That would be a challenging thing. We have opened for Franz Ferdinand and The White Stripes where there were these huge crowds. You go with the assumption that they are not going to like you, so if they do, especially the younger people then that's a bonus.

So to do something like BR549 did, opening for Dylan, would be an ambition?

That would be great. We'd love to do that.

You're almost in the same position that BR549 where when they started out in that their take on traditional country was left field when they started out but not so much now but what Blanche do is that little bit more removed now...

Yeah. (Tracee Mae enters the room). Hi Tracee. What is the secret of little amber bottles mean? That was your question, right? *Tracee*: Comfort and darkness. Secret places

Ronnie: The interplay between the instruments is very tight, Do you put a lot of thought into that?

I don't know, I'm really leery when I hear bands and people say "the drummer was really this or that, and the guitar player was punk rock". But with all of us we kind have our hearts in the same place so there's never a point when I've said when I've come up with a song that I had to say to Feeny "can you play something that's more this way". So that's it, everything is so simple.

So the group telepathy takes over?

We're on the same wavelength and part of that is that we know each other so well. We're a big odd family. We talk to each other about a million other things other than music. Life and everything. So if I bring an idea I don't have to explain what it's about. Everyone just listens to it and comes up with something that fits the song. Which I think is pretty lucky because when Little Jack wanted to play banjo with us, as our original banjo player was a friend of ours and Patch came up with great simple stuff, and Little Jack is definitely a better banjo player and he's more of an accomplished musician but Little Jack has kept that simplicity.

You play to each other's strengths which is not always the case in bands. Like Lisa her playing is very natural.

Right and she's always saying "don't you want me to play the more complicated fills". But no, as I think that would kill the music.

Ronnie: Did you notice the number of people who knew the words of the songs upfront?

I did. It was a surprise, especially the new songs. I think they knew the lyrics better than I did (laughs). It was really great. But there is something about playing in Dublin that feels like home.

How do you see the music of Blanche developing in the future?

I think that for this album that it was challenging to try something different like we added some strings to the arrangements. And like Tracee, as she is so shy, she had never sung before, so for her to sing a couple of the songs that was something that was really different. I don't know what the next album would be but one thing I was thinking was that it would be really challenging to write some optimistic songs as most of our songs are sad ones. There's a lot of beauty in sorrow and it's what a lot of opera is built on.

There is that link to much earlier old time music in what you do that could be explored. Has Detroit been much of an influence?

Well we shot a video for *What This Town Needs* a while back and we shot it in Henry Ford's first Model T plant. The public's not allowed in there but we had a friend who got us in there for a couple of days. Everything is cleared out and it's all decaying but it was incredible to see all these balconies and where the trains used to come through. It's in Highland Park which is a northern part of Detroit. There are some business running out of there but the main part is filled with asbestos. We went out of there coughing pretty badly after a couple of days.

Does any of the musical legacy of Detroit influence you, the MC5, Stooges?

I never really listened to the MC5 that much or even the Stooges. I listened to more of the bands that they influenced. But it was the music that my parents listened to, my dad's mother was from County Sligo and he had lived on a farm outside of Chicago and he played country music and he loved a lot of the countrypolition stuff, so I was always drawn to that. But there is something about the power and abrasivness of that punk rock music that still resonates.

It would be interesting to hear Blanche explore that countrypolition sound but with your twist to it?

It would be really fun to do that. People often get down on the countrypolition stuff but Ray Price did such a great job of keeping the emotion of the song, simple and



genuine, and you can't keep doing the same thing forever.

Do you let politics filter into your music on any level?

More subliminal. We are not much of a political band. We're more selfish about the emotions I guess.

Do you find that as a travelling American that you get some negative reactions in Europe?

For sure. People don't like Americans that's for sure. I think that in the rest of the world people don't know how much angst there is in America. There is that feeling that Americans buy into everything, but a lot of people are really unhappy. And there's a lot to be unhappy about. It's up to the people to try to secure the future in an OK way.

Aside from the bands you mentioned are there any other band's you've seen treading a similar path?

I don't really keep up with modern music, and I should. I love old music. So I have to push myself to listen to newer bands. Like with Will Oldham he doesn't use a bunch of drum loops and this and that. He pushes the ideas.

In Fader magazine a while back Will Oldham interviewed Dwight Yoakam which was interesting.

Well *Guitars and Cadillacs* was the first album of Dwight's I heard and that was an influence and that acoustic album he did was so beautiful. His voice is so wonderful, there is a lot of emotion in the songs. But then I've heard negative things about Dwight Yoakam like that he's just ripping off Buck Owens, regurgitating the Bakersfield thing but I've never felt that. I think he's doing his own thing. People also said that about that band the Derailers too who were really going for that and they did a great job of doing it. But I feel with Dwight Yoakam it's something more original.

How important is the visual aspect of what you do and the clothes you wear?

For me it's important. It's funny that when Little Jack joined we never had to say "this is how we dress" he got it, There's something about when you play a show, and when I did a couple of solo shows, I feel better making the effort, there are people who can just get up in a t-shirt and do it. It just gets me more into a performing mood and I like that. If Tracee and I are going out to dinner we like to dress up. There's nothing about it that feels fake. If people come out and pay good money to see us and we have this style that we like it's a part of it. We went out for Tracee's birthday last week and everybody that was with us they weren't surprised to see us all dressed up. Some of them were in t-shirts and jeans or whatever but they know that's how we've always been. I look in vintage stores and there's also a lot of people making great new clothes. On stage I was talking about the barber I went to today and I was talking about getting you hair cut as I really only go to get my hair cut in a really traditional barbers shop. I was just walking by and I went in and talked to the barber and he was such a nice guy. He had a new gentleman's hairdressing place and he knew how to do a shave. Men used to get their haircut every week as it wasn't as expensive then so it went to every couple of months and so barbers had to then start charging even more and in the end a lot of barbers couldn't survive. You end up with women cutting men's hair for \$40. He said he's trying to do something that has that old feeling. I told him "I think that that's an art". I told him what I wanted and he told me that what I wanted was a "Butler Haircut". I said "that sounds good". I said "I wish you were in Detroit and he said you have to find a good old Jewish barber, that's who he learned from and he loved the old haircuts but he was also trying to add new things. Taking old inspiration and adding something new it's something Tracee does with her painting. She says "is everyone going to say I'm ripping off Egon Schiele". But you can't just try to do something abrasive or different you have to do it. Because if you love parts of some old things you need to embrace those things and be inspired by them but put your own twist on to whatever you're doing. Tracee has four paintings going on at our house now. She does a kind of expressionist thing that somewhere between that and impressionism. Her painting is on the new album but we're going to put a different painting on the US release. She did two different paintings for *Little Amber Bottles*.

The thing about Tracee's painting is that it reflects some of the real sadness she had growing up. But it's really beautiful.



th' legendary shack*shakers

SW
AM
PB
LO
OD

Is anyone ever

ready to hear

the truth? The

world never

likes it told to

them straight.





You have designated Swampblood as the final part of the Tentshow Trilogy does that mean you foresee a change of direction for the Shack*Shakers for your next release?

Well, I already have the next two records written and more or less planned out, but things always change as you go. And when the other fellas get into the process, and other ideas get bandied about, you always wind up with a "Bizarro World" version of what you originally had in mind. Of course, for us that's a good thing.

Have the Shack*Shakers come close to fulfilling the vision you had for the band when you started out or has the band developed in a different way, either musically or career wise?

I always wanted to make interesting, soulful low-brow Rock 'n Roll. We've accomplished that and we enjoy the respect of our peers and even our idols. However, unfortunately for us, the world went the way of Emo, Jam Bands and Rap. We've done it all our own way and have the integrity to remain a staple of the worldwide scene.

The rest of the band line-up has completely changed from the early version represented on the live "Lower Broad Lo-Fi" album that came out recently, yet the overall concept is still very recognisable. Is that down to your strength of vision and picking the right players to work with?

I'm pretty sure I was drunk when we recorded that CD. It sounds like straight-up shit. Nowadays, the band makes records far superior to that bootleg. Don't get me wrong, the players on "Low Fi" are superb, but I have to be more in control of myself in order to get the desired results. And for me, recording a CD with a snootful of whiskey is never a good idea.

Has the current line-up settled down to a set of players who share your vision and future?

Yes. They are Mark Robertson on doghouse bass, David Lee on guitar, and Brett Whitacre on drums. They rock harder than anyone...EVER.

The Shack*Shakers should, I feel, have received greater recognition than they have so far, do you feel that that may be down to the perception that you are a roots band rather than a rock band?

We're not famous because we don't play shitty music.

How much difference would a major label deal make to band if at all?

It would help, of course. But since when are major labels interested in songs about the graveyard? We aren't, after all, some Boy Band with a lot of funky, urban rhythms. Neither are we some wholesome "O Brother" act with puffy shirts and mussed hair.

Swampblood is the best thing you have recorded to date, not taking away from the previous albums, but there seems to be a stronger and more varied sound with less vocal distortion which allows the songs greater scope. Was this a conscious move to make the music more accessible?

I wanted every vocal take to be pure, without an accompanying singing performance. This makes the song more believable and therefore more accessible to folks. It's just a guy in a room singing his little heart out.

Also, I have always liked the straightforward swamp blues of guys like Slim Harpo and Lazy Lester. There needs to be more music like that nowadays. Anything that will stem this ceaseless tide of Emo, Rap and Jam Bands.

Born Again Again could easily pick-up airplay if it was allowed onto the airwaves.

Thank you?

You have said that this album marks a return to your rockin hillbilly/blues roots, was that an important for the music?

Yes. I thought we were pushing the polka thing to hard for a while. I didn't want folks to start thinking we were a "World Music" outfit. I love polka, klezmer and Flamenco music...it is, after all, the "blues" of the Near East. And it has much in common with our own Texas 2-beat roots.

But when all is said and done, I guess I'm just the world's biggest sucker for that "echo and twang" thang.

The "Lower Broad Lo-Fi" CD features songs from the likes of Slim Harpo and Magic Sam, was that blues influence the one that was the stronger of the two?

That's nearly ten-years old, unauthorized bootleg sucks. And I want to apologize to the families of both Magic Sam and Slim Harpo.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSH BLACK WILKINS

You've said that your recent move to western Kentucky has had a direct influence on the music. How important is location to making your music?

In order to be authentic, music must be born out of real environments and real experience. It can't be manufactured in some songwriter workshop by a buncha "Music Row" yuppie dorks.

This is why roots music sucks today. The influx of "white flight" from L.A. into Nashville, Tennessee and Austin, Texas has ruined Country Music. Period.

It also immerses you deeper in the southern culture from which you derive inspiration. Is that something that is now stronger or do you feel it is something that you will move away from?

I will never stop being a psychotic southern Christian with something to say. No more than Woody Allen could ever stop being a neurotic New York City Jew. It's just who I am and I'm proud of it.

You are completing work on your movie "Seven Signs", which was, in part, a reaction to a distorted vision that you felt was portrayed by the "Searching For The Wrong Eyed Jesus" film. That was an outsider's view, do you think that "Seven Signs" will be a truer representation?

Absolutely. It will be completed in time for the Sundance and SXSW application deadlines. So keep an eye out for that.

You have been well-received in Europe do you intend to concentrate on building an audience there as much as in the US? Are they ready for the Southern Experience?

Is anyone ever ready to hear the truth? The world never likes it told to them straight. But if you can avoid rhetoric & couch your message in an entertaining format, it's easier for folks to accept. But our story is a tale common to all parts of the world: The oppression of a people by a government and a cultural bias. Who can't relate to that?

Of the various strands that you are creatively involved with, music, cinema, art and literature does one have a precedent over another or can you give equal time to each?

I just take advantage of any downtime that comes along. I don't enjoy vacations. I don't know even what I'm supposed to do. Lay there and "soak in some rays"?

I also don't like video games, TV or other wastes of time. It's a cliché, but we only get one life, so I'm making the best of mine.

Do you consider yourself then a modern-day sideshow host to the Southern experience?

I guess. But in stead of flim-flam and snake oil, I'm more into the Truth, authenticity, and staying "low to the ground".

Are you optimistic about the future?

No.

Interview by Steve Rapid



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RONNIE NORTON

Moot based himself in Nashville in 2001. Originally from New Jersey he moved to Music City to pursue a career singing and writing what he tearmed “solid gold country”. There he played, wrote and recorded his own brand of contemporary roots music. He send out demos and sold CDs at his gigs. One of those recordings went to Little Dog Records. Then one year after moving to Nashville, Moot moved to Los Angeles to make a record with former Dwight Yoakam producer and guitarist Pete Anderson. Little Dog Records later released his self-titled album and the follow up album ALREADY MOVED ON is now available.

MOOT DAVIS MOVES HIS MUSIC ON

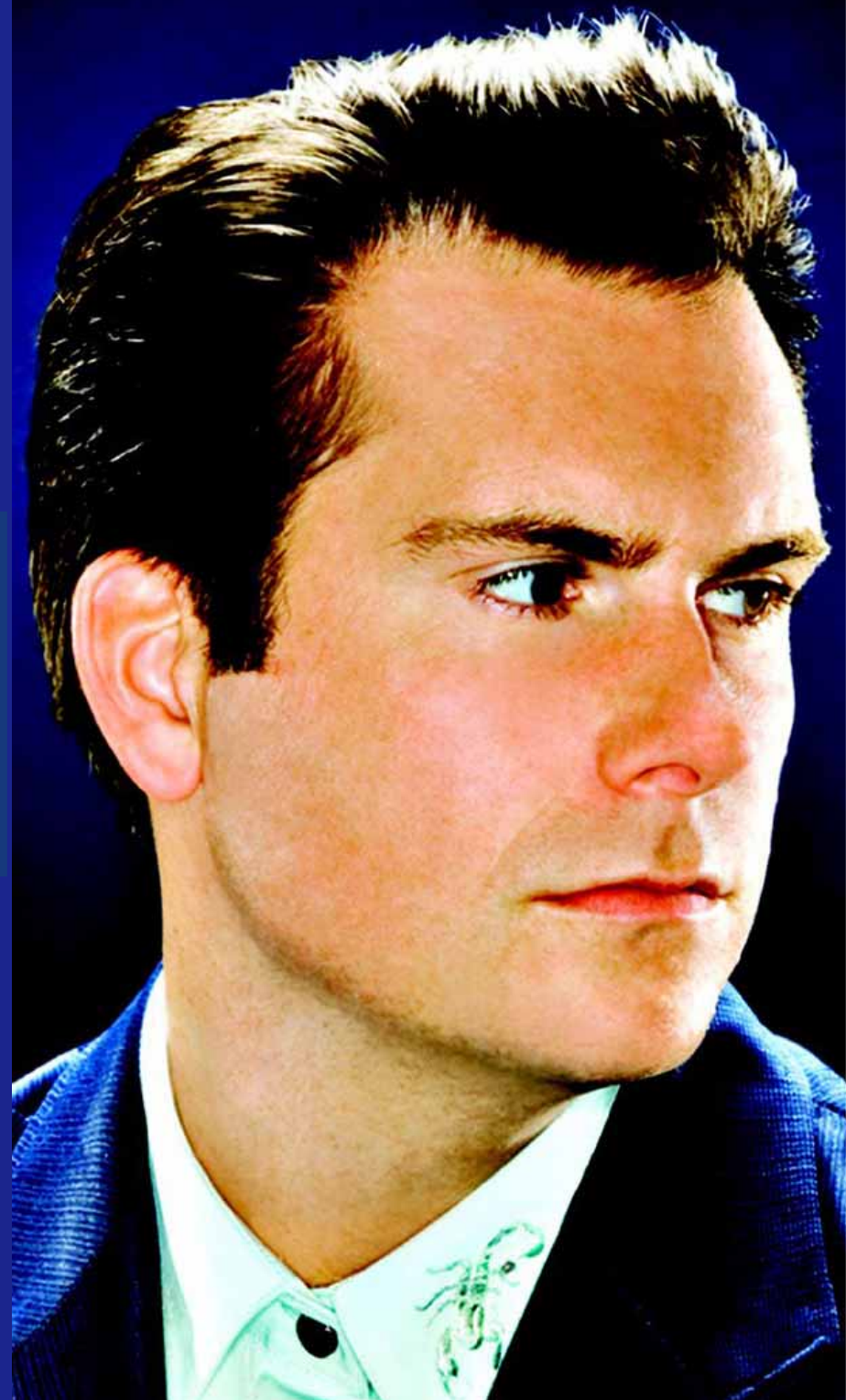
Did your move from Nashville to LA have any effect on how you approach your music?

I was always trying to bridge the gap between the "Golden Era" country music that I fell in love with and what I was hearing currently on the radio. I think moving out to Los Angeles and, more importantly, working with Pete Anderson, helped streamline this effort. It also helped me to grow out of any retro hang-ups I still had. Early on, after work-

ing with Pete, we tried to make new music. We knew where our roots were but we weren't trying imitate them.

As someone playing and recording contemporary country music what are your ambitions for the future?

To continue to build a career, keep making new music, keep touring, keep placing my songs in movies/TV shows and have fun. Fun is the big one, having fun and loving what you do.



You've moved into a similar position that Dwight Yoakam had with Pete Anderson as your producer, arranger and guitarist. Was that difficult to do?

It was terrifying at first but Pete was great and really took the time to help me grow into my new role. It was like jumping into the fast lane and for most of it I just held on as best as I could.

Can an artist, playing the music you do, make a living from making music alone, or do you need another income?

I've been lucky with getting my songs placed in movies like "Crash" and "The Hills Have Eyes" and smaller films and TV shows. There is even one in the Irish independent feature "Small Engine Repair", so that helps. I've been able to do music only for about four years now. Touring and selling albums at the shows also makes this possible. Some months are more interesting than others but that's the game.

You're music gets a good reaction in Europe. Do you have any plans in that regard?

I am really proud that the reaction is so good in Europe and I plan on touring over there as much as possible.

How do you find your audience has changed since you started?

I'm not sure they have? There's more of them, hopefully, and we're reaching people in other

countries like Europe and Japan but I don't think the core audience has changed at all.

You now co-write some of your songs with Pete Anderson. Do you enjoy the co-writing situation?

I would work on a song and bring it to Pete and he would tweak it here and there. It was just a natural way of working together. We didn't sit down and try to pull something out of the air. It was enjoyable and it makes you a better writer.

In pure musical terms can your music progress and still stay within the confines of country music?

Yes, it can and I think the new album "Already Moved On" is a great example of that musical progress.

Do you write mainly from experience or do you draw influence from outside sources?

Mostly from personal experience – other times it can be a turn of phrase that someone has just said. I use to belong to the Los Angeles Athletic Club, a gym and social club rolled into one. On the third floor they had a bar where I spent most of my time. One of the other regulars was an old alcoholic Japanese ex-banker, who found it hysterical that I was a country singer. One afternoon as we sat at the bar he said "Moooot, isn't country music all foreclosures and repossessions?" I laughed and wrote those three words down on a cocktail napkin. It later became a song on the new album.

Who, among your contemporaries, do you admire?

Lyle Lovett has a career I would like to emulate. I've liked his music for a long time.

Do you prefer playing live to recording?

Recording is fun but playing live is why I do this. Touring, playing is what I like to do best.

How do you feel about country artists who dress in rock/pop style rather than in more traditional country clothing?

Clothing is the least of country music's problems.

How relevant, in your opinion, is country music for today's audience?

If it touches you and you are moved by it, then it is relevant. This goes for any type of music and any type of audience.

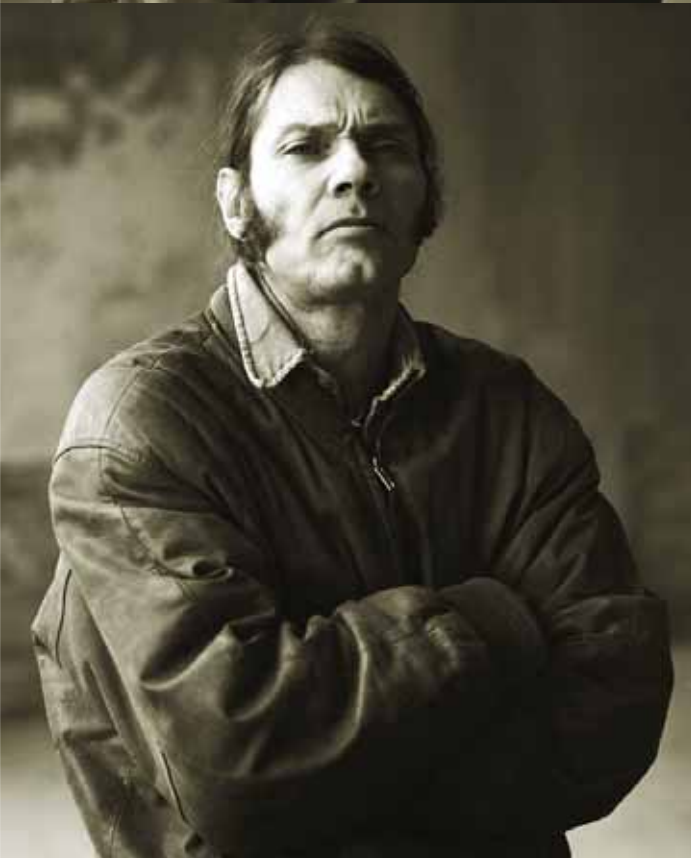
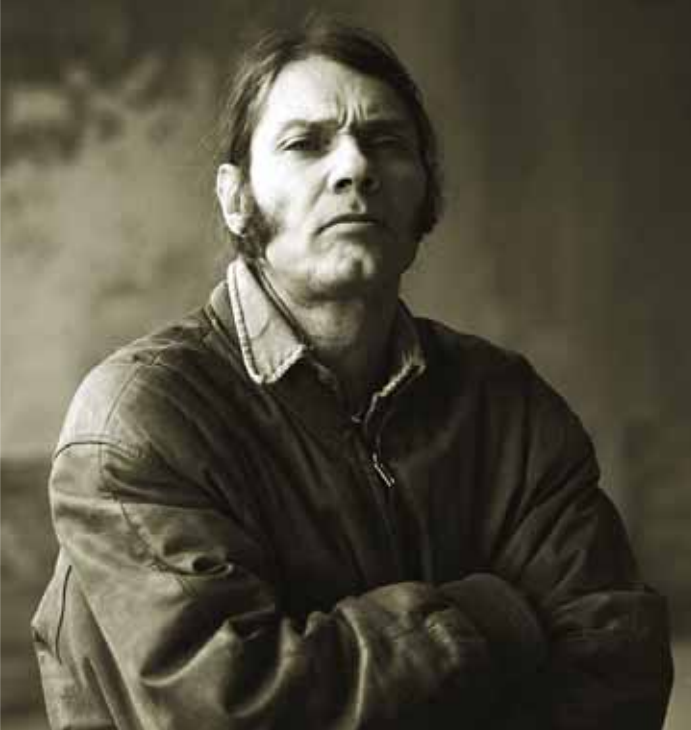
Finally, what are your landmark albums?

"Gold" by Conway Twitty, "Honky Tonk Man" by Johnny Horton, anything by Hank Sr., and "Desire" by Bob Dylan.



malcolm holcombe

Situated somewhere between Saturday night and Sunday morning, between sin and (hopefully) salvation, Malcom Holcombe is perfectly poised to pen his songs that draw from his own life and of those around him. It is raw, righteous and real. In person Holcombe is disarmingly charming and down to earth, self-deprecating, his voice is full of grit and his slow drawl is full of a dry wit and is both expressive and enriched with a North Carolina twang. He is in Dublin for a quick promotional visit to promote his latest album released here in Europe on Munich Records. So Lonesome Highway took the opportunity to talk to him.



We sit in a booth and talk over a cup of coffee, Holcombe has recently flown into Dublin and is still suffering jet-lag. He picks up a number of copies of previous issues and stops at an interview with Jim Lauderdale, a fellow Carolina native.

Lookee here there's Jim, Mr Lauderdale. He's a talented feller.

You were born in 1955. What were your influences growing up?

I listened to stations out of Chicago and Fort Wayne, Indiana. WLS, WOWO were some of the stations. That would have been mid to late Sixties. I had an old radio that I could listen to late at night. The local stations went off air and you could pick-up the other shows. So I listened to whatever they were playing on AM. I was ten, twelve years old and it was rock 'n' roll. When the local stations cut their power you could dial in the bigger stations from further away. I used to watch Flatt and Scruggs on television, and the Arthur Smith show too.

You had a band back then didn't you?

The Hilltoppers. We played old Peter, Paul and Mary tunes. Some of the old stuff that I don't remember. But Peter, Paul and Mary used to do a lot of covers. I couldn't play Smoke On The Water and all that electric stuff. I wasn't no good... still ain't no good (laughs).

Where do you live now?

I live in North Carolina with my wife and Jessie, she'll be nine years old on the 17th of September.

How do you go about your business?

I'm pretty independent, my wife does the bookings and we put out a couple of records on our own. It's a self-thing, I go out and do some playing. I'm trying to break some new ground and to stay busy.

It's a great album and if it gets exposure should make friends.

Well we had a lot of fun making it.

You seems to write about the diversity of human relationships, is that your main theme?

That sounds good, I'll go with that. It needs to be something worth repeating and worth remembering. Not that any of it is but it's what I do. I've been doing it for awhile. Well, by the Grace of the good Lord, I try to keep working. I try to live in my own skin without selling out. I try to keep things in perspective and just do the work. Suit up and show up.

Come over here wherever, I try to be there, show up and do what's needed. I mean if anybody didn't show up nothing would be done.

Are you going to do some dates here?

I don't know, maybe. I'd sure like to. I'm trying to kick the beehive on this thing (the new album) and see if anybody likes it. Then if the bees get stirred up we'll either get stung or some honey, maybe a little of both. There you go. Have you got bees around here?

Yes, we have some bees here.

The internet has levelled the playing field a little.

My wife Cindy put together my web site. A cyber telephone pole. You get get yourself in trouble or make a mountain out of a molehill out there. It helps us out. It keeps us in touch with people but it can also be a

blackhole that sucks the mind. You can end up sitting in a little corner glued to the screen.

(Malcolm picks up Lonesome Highway) This is good it's tangible. You can see it and touch it. It looks good and you can smell it. Black and white. Paper and ink. The pictures look good.

On the album on some songs you used a full band while others are more stripped down. Do you like to work in both settings?
It depends on the song. Well if the song calls for it. You don't want to go out on a summer's day in an Eskimo suit.

So when you write the song do you have an idea how it will end up?

No. I don't think about the production. When I'm making up a tune I don't think about the production. I just try to keep the rhythm. It depends on the occasion. We do those records by the skin of our teeth. Money is the thing. You know what the say absolute power corrupts absolutely. If you have lots of money you just spend it. You don't need to beat a dead horse. I don't like too much stuff on my songs. I like to keep it pretty basic. Let it just happen, that's the ticket right there. It doesn't sound so contrived. I don't like not being in control, I'm a control freak. But I can take an idea and run with it, Maybe then embellish it and strengthen the idea without losing the focus of what it was in the embryo. You can maybe change it into something worth saving. This particular project (album) we had a little bit of money to get it started and the guys who worked on it Aaronn Price and Bill Reynolds were helping out people and they do a real good job. They were in it for the music.

Your music is coming from a real place...

Yeah, but some of that stuff I don't want to go through again either (laughs). I had enough of that shit. I need to remember a lot of it as some of it is less than savoury.

Is life good now?

It's a miracle. It's a blessing to be sitting here, or where ever.

What else do you enjoy outside of the music?

I like to work around the house. I like to plant things, having a garden. It's a small garden. Corn, we have ears of corn but some of the stuff didn't do too good this year.



I have cucumbers and peppers. I go fishing. You should have seen the one that got away.

I'm blessed beyond words with family and friends. Being able to work and to travel and to meet people is wonderful. If I was just in it for the money I wouldn't be over here. I don't have much of an education so I'm kinda stuck with doing what I'm doing.

My wife has rekindled my interest in some of the old stuff, like delta blues.

In the live situation is that something you do solo or do you bring a band?

By myself. Once in awhile, when the money's right I pick up some guys. I don't want someone to play for me for nothing. That's just baggage that I don't need. I don't like owing favours. People can hold grudges if you can't pay them back. One hand washes the other. I just try to do right by people, one on one. There are people that have helped me out but some people hold the favour thing like a carrot in front of a mule. I don't keep up with favours real good. I don't operate like that. I gets under my skin. I'm tainted enough as it is. Friends and neighbours or strangers, you should try to be nice to everybody.

Malcolm Holcombe has just released a new album Gamblin' House as well as a new EP Wager in the US available at www.malcolmholcombe.com

Malcolm Holcombe plays the Kilkenny Rhythm and Roots Festival in May.

THE HACIENDA BROTHERS



FOLLOWING APPEARANCES AT THE KILKENNY AND MIDLANDS FESTIVALS WHERE THEY WOWED THEIR AUDIENCES WITH THEIR BRAND OF HARD COUNTRY AND WESTERN SOUL. THEY HAVE RELEASED A LIVE ALBUM, FROM A RADIO SHOW, THAT SHOWCASES THAT EXCITEMENT AND VERVE.

Lonesome Highway's Steve Rapid interviews guitarist Dave Gonzalez





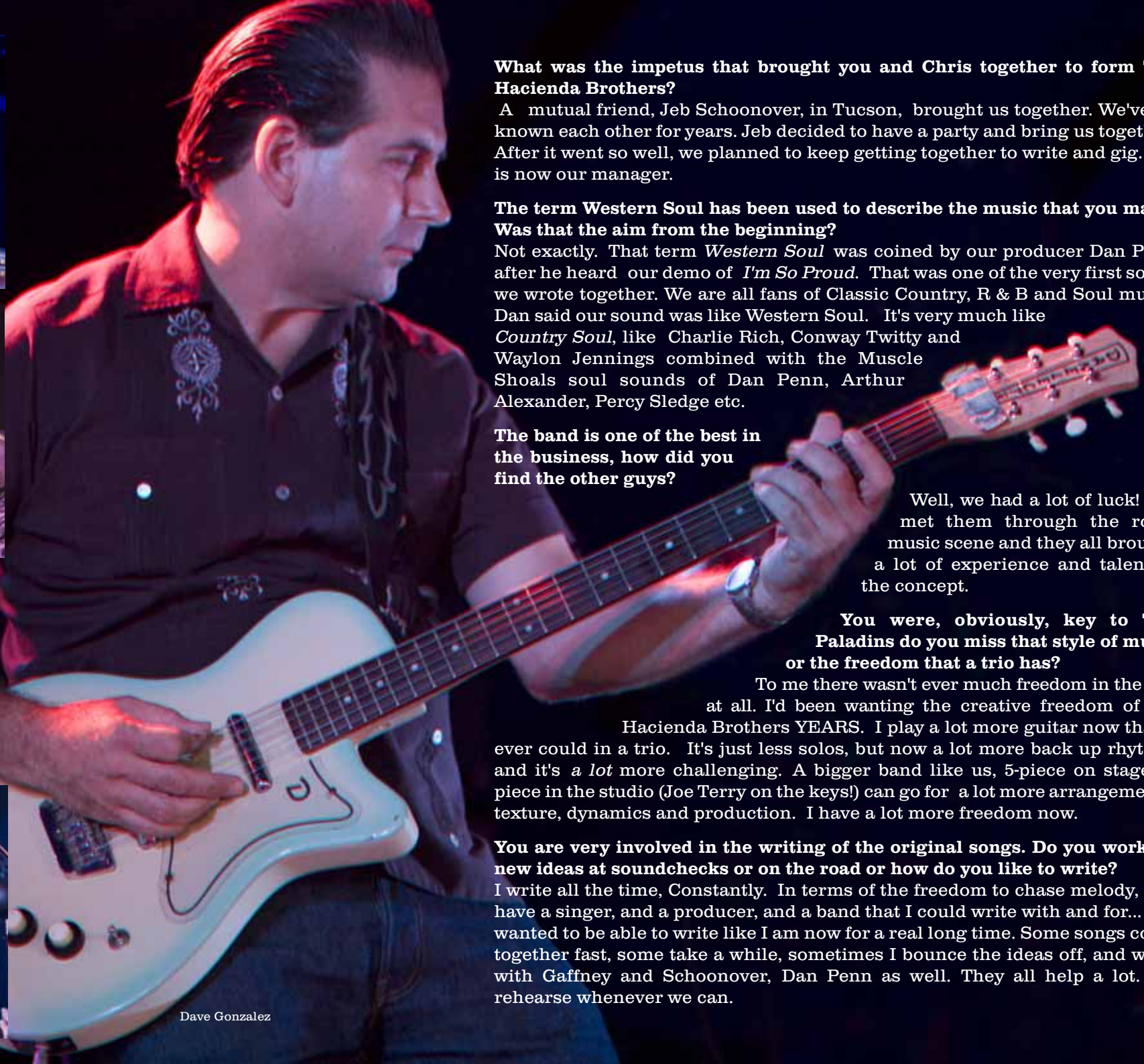
David Berzansky



Dale Daniel



Hank Maninger



Dave Gonzalez

What was the impetus that brought you and Chris together to form The Hacienda Brothers?

A mutual friend, Jeb Schoonover, in Tucson, brought us together. We've all known each other for years. Jeb decided to have a party and bring us together. After it went so well, we planned to keep getting together to write and gig. Jeb is now our manager.

The term Western Soul has been used to describe the music that you make. Was that the aim from the beginning?

Not exactly. That term *Western Soul* was coined by our producer Dan Penn after he heard our demo of *I'm So Proud*. That was one of the very first songs we wrote together. We are all fans of Classic Country, R & B and Soul music, Dan said our sound was like Western Soul. It's very much like *Country Soul*, like Charlie Rich, Conway Twitty and Waylon Jennings combined with the Muscle Shoals soul sounds of Dan Penn, Arthur Alexander, Percy Sledge etc.

The band is one of the best in the business, how did you find the other guys?

Well, we had a lot of luck! We met them through the roots music scene and they all brought a lot of experience and talent to the concept.

You were, obviously, key to The Paladins do you miss that style of music or the freedom that a trio has?

To me there wasn't ever much freedom in the trio at all. I'd been wanting the creative freedom of the Hacienda Brothers YEARS. I play a lot more guitar now than I ever could in a trio. It's just less solos, but now a lot more back up rhythm, and it's *a lot* more challenging. A bigger band like us, 5-piece on stage, 6-piece in the studio (Joe Terry on the keys!) can go for a lot more arrangements, texture, dynamics and production. I have a lot more freedom now.

You are very involved in the writing of the original songs. Do you work up new ideas at soundchecks or on the road or how do you like to write?

I write all the time, Constantly. In terms of the freedom to chase melody, and have a singer, and a producer, and a band that I could write with and for... I've wanted to be able to write like I am now for a real long time. Some songs come together fast, some take a while, sometimes I bounce the ideas off, and write with Gaffney and Schoonover, Dan Penn as well. They all help a lot. We rehearse whenever we can.

Aligned to that how do you decide to choose a song to cover?

It's all of us including Jeb, we all bring songs in, but ultimately it's what Chris decides he wants to sing.

Good as the studio albums are many felt they didn't quite capture the Hacienda Brothers live experience. Is that why you have decided to release (through your website) this first live album?

They are two completely different aspects of this band. We got lucky with this new live record. It just all fell into place, and yes we've had a lot of requests for a live record, but I never got together with Jeb, Gaffney and Dan Penn in a plan to be a "live" act. We got together to write songs, and create our own version of American Roots Music - on tape, in the studio. We had a lot of songs, and then we got just the right Cats to join with us to record. All the members H-Bros band are VERY accomplished, studio caliber musicians who can also play live too! But the records we make in the studio mean much more to me than anything "live". I guess I'm just coming from a different place about it.

The live stage seems to be your natural environment. The band obviously has that close interaction, how important is it for the band?

We've become tighter from playing live so much in these past three years, and that also translates to recording tape. We've become a band, and that's wonderful because now we sound like a band, not just cats jammin' or playing on a session.

How do you divide your time between gigging in the US and in Europe?

We've been fortunate to be able to get to Europe many times and play in front of some of the most music-loving folks overseas, but we are also very happy to be home with our families. The cost to get a 5-piece band on tour is high, so that's the most difficult part of it, and it's getting more difficult all the time because the world's economy is so bad these days.

Do you think that the changes in the way records are retailed has a direct effect on a band like yourselves?

Very much! We aren't a "commercial" band with a big hit - we're just trying to have a unique and timeless sound, and it's difficult to sell a lot of records when our sound is still, and always will be, coming from more traditional inspiration.

Have you seen your website having a direct effect on how you function as a band?

Yes, it's a real great way to get your name and information to people. It's REALLY Fantastic!

The Hacienda's dress in a particular way. Do you feel that having a look has a positive effect on the way a band feels?

Our 'look', I never thought about it much in that I've looked like this for 25 years. Our look is just "us". We look like a band I guess, and we want to look professional on stage and off.

You have been hailed as one of the best guitarists around yet you always seem to be a guitarist who serves the song rather than the song serving the solo. Is that your intention?

Very much so, yes. I'm playing the song. It's the words that are most important to me and I think more people like to sing along to words. I know I do, it's hard to sing to solos!

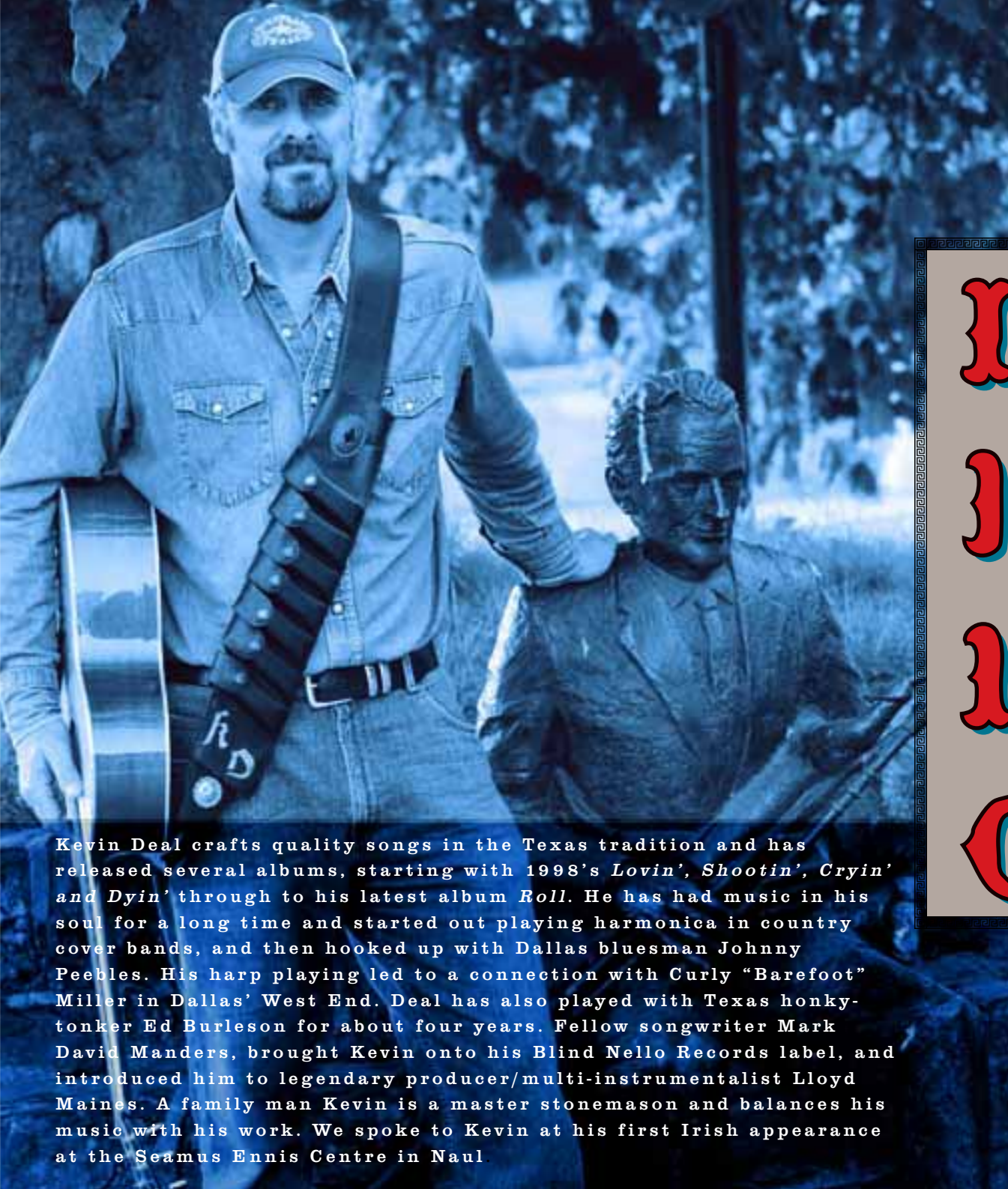
Are you working on your next studio album and how will it differ from your previous albums?

Yes, we've just started the new recordings, but this time, we started in Nashville. Dan Penn is still our producer and we've got a lot of songs to choose from. We have to see how they pan out and which ones stick. That will determine what this next record will end up being.

Any plans to play Ireland in the coming months?

Ireland has some of the best music loving people we've ever been fortunate enough to play for...we LOVE Ireland and hope to get back there very soon.





KEVIN DEAL ROLLS ON

Kevin Deal crafts quality songs in the Texas tradition and has released several albums, starting with 1998's *Lovin', Shootin', Cryin' and Dyin'* through to his latest album *Roll*. He has had music in his soul for a long time and started out playing harmonica in country cover bands, and then hooked up with Dallas bluesman Johnny Peebles. His harp playing led to a connection with Curly "Barefoot" Miller in Dallas' West End. Deal has also played with Texas honky-tonker Ed Burleson for about four years. Fellow songwriter Mark David Manders, brought Kevin onto his Blind Nello Records label, and introduced him to legendary producer/multi-instrumentalist Lloyd Maines. A family man Kevin is a master stonemason and balances his music with his work. We spoke to Kevin at his first Irish appearance at the Seamus Ennis Centre in Naul.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RONNIE NORTON

HOW DID YOU GET INTO MAKING MUSIC?

I had a rock band when I was younger, just out of high school. I wrote songs then but I took a break from music because I was raising kids. I slowly got back into it after that.

YOUR FIRST ALBUM CAME OUT IN 1998 AND YOU STARTED WORKING WITH LLOYD MAINES THEN...

Yes, Lloyd has worked with me on all my CDs. He's taught me a lot and helped me a lot. He's just a pleasure to work with.

HOW DO YOU PLAY IN THE STATES, SOLO OR WITH A BAND?

Depends on how much they're paying me (laughs). If I'm getting good money it's a five piece band with steel and electric guitar.

WHERE DO YOU PLAY?

Mostly around Texas but also in New Mexico and Colorado.

THE LABEL BLIND NELLO IS THAT YOUR OWN?

It's a loose confederation of Mark David Manders, Max Stalling and myself.

HAS THE CURRENT CLIMATE IN THE STATES AFFECT THE DIRECTION YOUR SONGS TAKE?

I have one song on this last record that deals with what's going on. Usually I don't get too political. But right now I think that we are being ill served by our politicians. They are not looking after our best interests. I usually write about outlaws and relationships and stuff like that (laughs).

IN YOUR EARLY DAYS WHAT INFLUENCED YOU TO TAKE A MORE ROOTSY DIRECTION WITH YOUR MUSIC?

Well there's a lot of different musical styles in Texas and I did a lot of sitting in with blues players, just playing the harmonica. I thoroughly enjoyed that and got to go to some pretty cool bars. I used to play harmonica with a guy named Ed Burlison. Through that I got back into writing my own songs again.

MY OWN STARTING POINT WAS DWIGHT YOAKAM...

Yeah I got his first record and was blown away by it. Later albums like Steve Earle's *Train A Comin'* and other progressive albums were a big influence.

YOU HAVE JUST RELEASED YOUR SIXTH ALBUM ROLL, HOW DO YOUR ALBUMS DO FOR YOU?

It's kinda hit and miss, we have some distribution and we sell off the web site but we sell most at shows.

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO TAKE YOUR MUSIC?

I just really enjoy writing songs and I hope someday that someone who makes a lot of money would also enjoy to sing one (laughs). Then I can go to the mail box and see the rewards, that's my goal.

YOU'RE WAITING FOR THE TIM MCGRAW COVER?

That would be nice, but George Strait preferably.

FOLLOW IN JIM LAUDERDALE'S SHOES...

He's a great writer and performer.

AS REGARDS OTHER TEXAS WRITERS, AMONG YOUR CONTEMPORARIES WHO DO YOU ADMIRE?

Max Stalling writes some great songs. Houston Marchman he is also a great writer. There's a lot of good writers in Texas. Another guy is Michael O'Neill who's got some interesting stuff too, it's real dark. He's from Paris, Texas.





SOME WRITERS PREFER NOT TO LISTEN TO OTHERS IN CASE THEY FEEL IT MIGHT EFFECT THEIR WRITING, WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THAT?

I've always like to listen to other people, more for structure than anything. Sometimes we'll hear a song and it inspires you to write better or go in a direction you might not have gone otherwise.

MUSICALLY THEN CAN YOU SEE YOURSELF TAKING YOUR MUSIC IN OTHER DIRECTIONS?

Sometimes when we travel we do a three piece acoustic and I enjoy that. Sometimes we'll add a pedal steel to that acoustic set up. We can strip it down for smaller venues.

If it's a bigger stage and a rockin' atmosphere then I really enjoy the drums and electric guitar. I like both to be honest. We do three or four blues songs and I really enjoy doing those. It breaks up the set and allows me to just play the harmonica.

HOW OFTEN TO YOU GET TO EUROPE?

This is my first time. We're just doing two Irish dates then it's back home. We tried to do a few more this trip but it didn't work out, maybe next time.

DO YOU GET TO READ A LOT ON YOUR TRAVELS?

Well I'm a slow reader (laughs). The last three books I read were 1776, John Adams and Born Fighting, a book about the Scots/Irish. I also just read the Prince and the Pauper. That's a kids book and, I'll tell you, that was a hard read. I've read the King James a lot and it seems to flow a lot smoother than the old English that Mark Twain was using. That was tough.

RONNIE: WHO DO YOU LISTEN TO WHEN YOU'RE TRAVELLING?

Well a lot of people give me CDs. Paul Piercy he just produced a CD for Edy Vaughn which is really good. Terri Hendrix and Lucinda Williams I like listening to. *Car Wheels On A Gravel Road* is one I listen to a lot. But the

guys in the van have got to hate it. Right now in the changer in the van I've got a Ricky Scaggs album and Paul Piercy's solo record. The Scaggs band I saw recently and those boys are musical athletes.

WHAT ABOUT A TRADITIONALIST LIKE WAYNE HANCOCK?

He's great, he's the real deal. Lloyd does his record. We've done some shows together.

HOW DID ROLL WORK OUT?

We started in September and it's just ready now. So when I get back I've a couple of CD release shoes to do. One in Dallas and one in Fort Worth. After that we go to Colorado and to New Mexico.

HOW OFTEN TO YOU AIM TO RECORD?

Well when I first started I did one a year now I spread them out a bit. I write all the time so when it comes time to record I go through them and it's "oh, I like that or else it's what the hell was I thinking" (laughs). Then it goes into the other pile.

DOES LLOYD HELPING THAT PROCESS?

You know I bring the songs and we do them and he hasn't had a problem with them so far. I came in there with two songs this time that I said "Lloyd I really like these words but I haven't got the music right yet" and two minuets later he had the music. He wrote them just like that. I was really happy with what he came up with too. Another song I had written but Lloyd suggest a totally different melody that worked so I split the writing with him on it. I love working with him. He's an incredibly patient man.

Interview by Steve Rapid



MARY GAUTHIER

S I D E S H O W T R O U B A D O U R

Onstage (and backstage) Mary Gauthier displays an openness and honesty that comes through in her songs and the stories she tells between them, as well in the way she answers the questions put to her. This may be at odds with the fact that she is a loner, a person who, by the nature of her profession, spends a great deal of time on her own, writing, travelling and performing solo. Arriving at that place in her life, though, may not have been where she has always wanted to be. "It was difficult at first. But then I accepted it and nothing is hard once you accept it. I assume that if you are dying and you can come to accept it you can be at peace with it. I've accepted that I'm going to be on my own, so I find ways to enjoy it. So it's no longer difficult, in fact I now enjoy it."

Gauthier has accepted this and now enjoys the travelling that is part and parcel of a working musician's life. She is back in Ireland to film a set for the tv show *Other Voices* and didn't want to come all the way across the Atlantic without at least doing a couple of gigs. So, with little notice, a gig in Dublin in the *Crawdaddy Club* and another in Belfast have been arranged before travelling to film the show. That tv appearance allowed her to do what she loves best – to travel and to play her songs to a live audience. "I love that I get to keep coming back to Europe, it's like going to Canada, or Ohio. What I mean is I don't acknowledge borders anymore. There is no foreign country to me anymore in the west. Foreign is not a word that I would ever use. I go around without regard to borders. Places get very familiar so that nothing feels strange anymore, it all feels like home, or is starting to feel like home now. Which is a great thing."

Mary sees this state as particular to the travelling troubadour. "I guess musicians alone get to this place, where having gone to so many different places, so many times, that the whole world begins to feel like home. Then borders seem arbitrary, but that's not to say that cultural differences aren't real but you come to respect them and not fear them."

The perception that many Americans support their government's policies has changed in recent times, and Mary Gauthier has never been aligned with their views and sees a strong shift in attitudes.

"I think enough Americans have come over with their heads bowed begging for... (laughs) mercy I guess. The first thing that most of us say when we come over here now is "I didn't vote for the prick", He's not my cowboy. In general I think that people understand that if you held people responsible for what their governments did you would be misguided. If we had had the power he couldn't have stolen the election, twice."

The restless spirit that inhabits Gauthier has its roots in her upbringing. She was adopted to a family in Thibodeaux, Louisiana but left in her early teens, stealing her adopted parent's car and there followed a journey that shaped her. It included a learning process of addiction, rootless travel, house painting and becoming a philosophy student at Louisiana State University before she ended up running a Cajun restaurant in the Back Bay section of Boston. But along the way writing had become a part of her life and it soon became her motivating factor. She wrote her first song at 35. A late starter for sure, but one with a store house of experience waiting to come out. Her first album, *Dixie Kitchen*, was named after that restaurant and released in 1997.

She is now signed to Lost Highway records where she has just her second album for the label. This has found her working with a new producer, Joe Henry, who has refined her sound. "It was a wonderful

experience. The highlight for me was that we did it in a week. I don't like agonizing over it. It's not what I enjoy. So being able to move quickly and get it done was just wonderful. He's able to do that because he has this hot-shot band. He does all the preparation in advance. He's very organized and very focused. He's a fantastic record producer." That she has now signed with a established label like Lost Highway has allowed her to have her music placed before a larger audience and given her greater freedom. "They provide opportunities that a small label can't. They make it so much more possible to do things. But it's still up to me. Like there ain't nobody here with me. I'm doing this tour myself. I'm figuring my way around the world, They make it possible for me to keep going. They are a well run label and I'm thrilled to be on their roster."

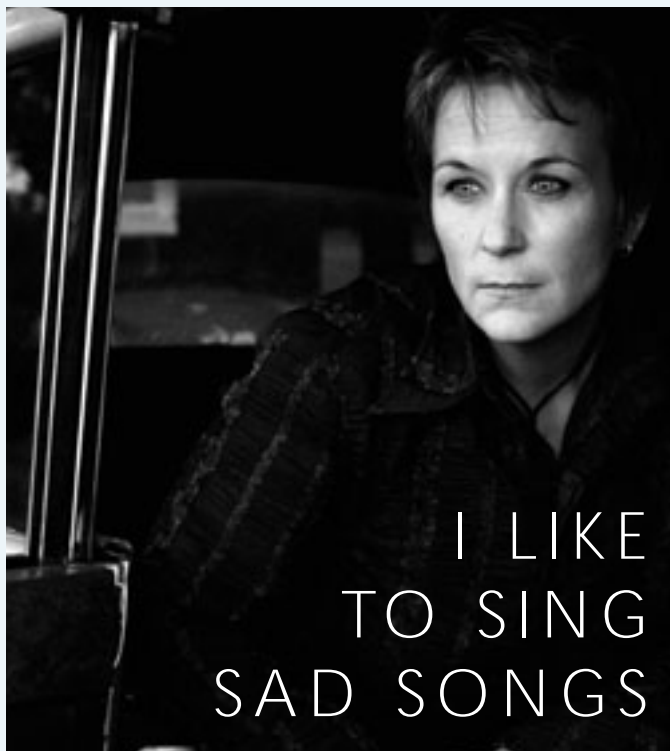
One of Lost Highway's founders was Frank Callari who was also Gauthier's manger until he passed away recently. Mary has lost a friend who was prior to his untimely death setting her up for a co-writing opportunity. "I was supposed to hook up with Shane McGowan, can you believe that? He's a great songwriter, but Frank had a heart attack in his sleep, before it could be arranged."

Despite telling a tale onstage of her earliest experience of a mismatched writing session that did not go well Mary enjoys co-writing with the right person. "Co-writing often takes you to a place you wouldn't normally go on your own. I love to write with melody people as I'm a words person. In fact I just wrote a song with Carrie Rodriguez up in New York city. She's making a record now with Malcolm Burn. She got a big deal with EMI. So she's up in Woodstock with Malcolm and she e-mailed me that they have recorded it. I love writing with people."

Just before going onstage in Dublin in the Crawdaddy's small dressing room, Gauthier plays me this song. A quiet and intimate performance of a new song that she is not yet playing live but one that, when she does, is going to be a highlight.

We talked about other contemporary songwriter and I mentioned that I had recently spoken with Malcolm Holcombe. "He's my buddy. I hooked him up with my record company in Holland. He's great. Malcolm is a genius. He looks like a street urchin but he has a very child-like quality. Sometimes people mistake him for an idiot. That's a big mistake." She said that she would love to do a European tour with him at some point. "God, I'd love to tour with Malcolm. He's sober now too. I'm always worried that he may not be."

However touring with a group of musicians is something that she would be interested in trying. She has previously toured with a guitarist, but has not played in Europe with a full band. "I do love playing with a band. It's a great feeling. I would love to do that." But would that I suggest mean that she would have to give up some of the freedom she enjoys travelling on her own. "I've never had an entourage. If things go big and there starts to be a lot of people attached...



well we'll see. I like to be in charge. I can see my self disappearing in that situation. "Where's Mary. I don't know. She's left town" (laughs).

She also talked about some of the other writers that she admires. "I'm a huge fan of Fred Eaglesmith and we write together when we can. He co-wrote the title track of my new album. But I'd love to try to co-write with Malcolm. You know he ends his shows by saying "Thank you for coming out. Good Night. And fuck Bush" (laughs).

She sees herself as the female version of the restless songwriters, the outlaws, like Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Townes van Zandt, Guy Clark and Steve Earle. But also Lucinda Williams, whom she sees as a fellow rootless seeker. "I really am the female version of Merle and Willie. I really don't know where home would be or if I was meant to have one. That's why I do what I do. Like that quote from Townes van Zandt " the prettiest thing I ever seen was the town disappearing out of my rear view mirror". I relate to that."

Although she claims not to be a prolific writer she has a number of songs ready for her next album which she may record later this year "at the rate I'm going with new songs." She has

also been writing prose and hopes to publish some short stories in 2008 too.

Mary Gauthier is a compelling story teller and songwriter who holds the attention of everyone in the room when she is on stage. The strength of her songs and the tales they tell, drawn from her own experience must be true to her, even if not about her. The recent Katrina devastation of New Orleans led to at least one song that dealt with that situation but in a more focused way, as well as with the wider issue, of home and what that can mean. "It's hard to talk about in that there were so many different aspects. The song that I wrote is in the first person and is about someone who doesn't know where their home is anymore. So instead of getting into the politics of Katrina I can relate to that person's feeling of homelessness. I wander around a lot cause I don't know how not to."

Her physical home, for now, is now in Nashville but her lifestyle means that the place she calls home is more likely to be in her heart. "I have a place in Nashville. But I've guess I've been on the road now for fourteen weeks. I like it (laughs). Not many people would. Not many people are suited for this job. People think they want it until they get it."

Interview by Steve Rapid

Andy Fairweather-Low

A Valley Boy Came Calling

I have been trying to set up an interview with Andy Fairweather Low for some months past but the timing is proving to be a problem. He is on the other side of the world, touring with the Roger Waters extravaganza, and that gigantic transatlantic telephone call is not taking place anytime soon.

Andy Fairweather Low was born in Cardiff in the 1950's, when rock n roll was waking up as a musical force with Elvis. He seems to have been flying under the radar for so many years now that he has become a music industry secret and it has taken the release of his first solo record in 26 years to flush him out into the spotlight again. The pedigree of the man is just jaw-dropping when you consider the list of true greats that he has shared both stage and studio with:

The Band, Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Richard Thompson, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck, George Harrison, and believe me, I could go on...!!

So, weeks have passed and I suddenly get a call from Stevo Berube, communications guru, to say that Andy will be in Dublin to play the Point with Roger Waters and could I make some time to meet up? To add insult to injury, Andy's flight has been delayed from his home in Wales and he only arrives at the venue an hour before the show. So, time is short and our conversation can only be brief over an interval meeting with the great man himself – Andy that is, not Roger!

What I find is a most affable, interesting human being with no airs or graces; just an easy gentleness and a wonderful wit. Andy Fairweather Lowe strikes me as very comfortable in his own skin right now and for someone who has been living the rock n' roll dream for 5 decades, that is some testament. From '60's hit band Amen Corner, through a series of solo records in the '70's, this man has been there, seen it all and bought several T-shirts...

The list of industry legends that have called upon his talents shows the quality of playing that Andy Fairweather Lowe brings to each assignment. The phone keeps ringing and the gigs keep coming and he has earned a level of respect among the really great players in this industry to provide an enduring legacy with the best of them.

Roger Waters drops by the table where we are seated and proffers a "Carry on No 1" in mock salute and flying captain army cliché. It strikes me that no better tribute could be paid in salute of the man and his essential contribution to so many records over the years. A member of Eric Clapton's group for nigh on 13 years, Andy tells me that he forced himself to leave the 'comfort zone' afforded him in order to write his solo offering. As he sings in 'What'd You Take Me To Be' – "You See, I didn't want to leave but I just couldn't stay"... Words that could apply to many situations we face in life. Perfect in every way!

His solo record, titled 'Sweet Soul Music' is a hidden gem; one that slipped past most of our compiled lists of favourite releases in 2006.

Working with legendary producer Glyn Johns, whose knack for delivering musical and sonic authenticity was honed while he engineered the Beatles and the Stones,

Andy opted for stripped-down settings featuring just his guitar, the bass of Dave Bronze (Robin Trower, Procol Harum, Clapton) and the drumming of Henry Spinetti (Clapton, Harrison, Paul McCartney, Roger Daltrey), with John "Rabbit" Bundrick (the Who, Pete Townshend, Bob Marley) adding piano to two tracks. This gathering of musicians is something of a return to years gone by as the ensemble was responsible for most of Andy's solo work in the 1970's. The arrangements and playing are Premiership quality with lightness of touch empowering the songs and a sense of 'less-is-more' entwining each track into a rich and complete whole...

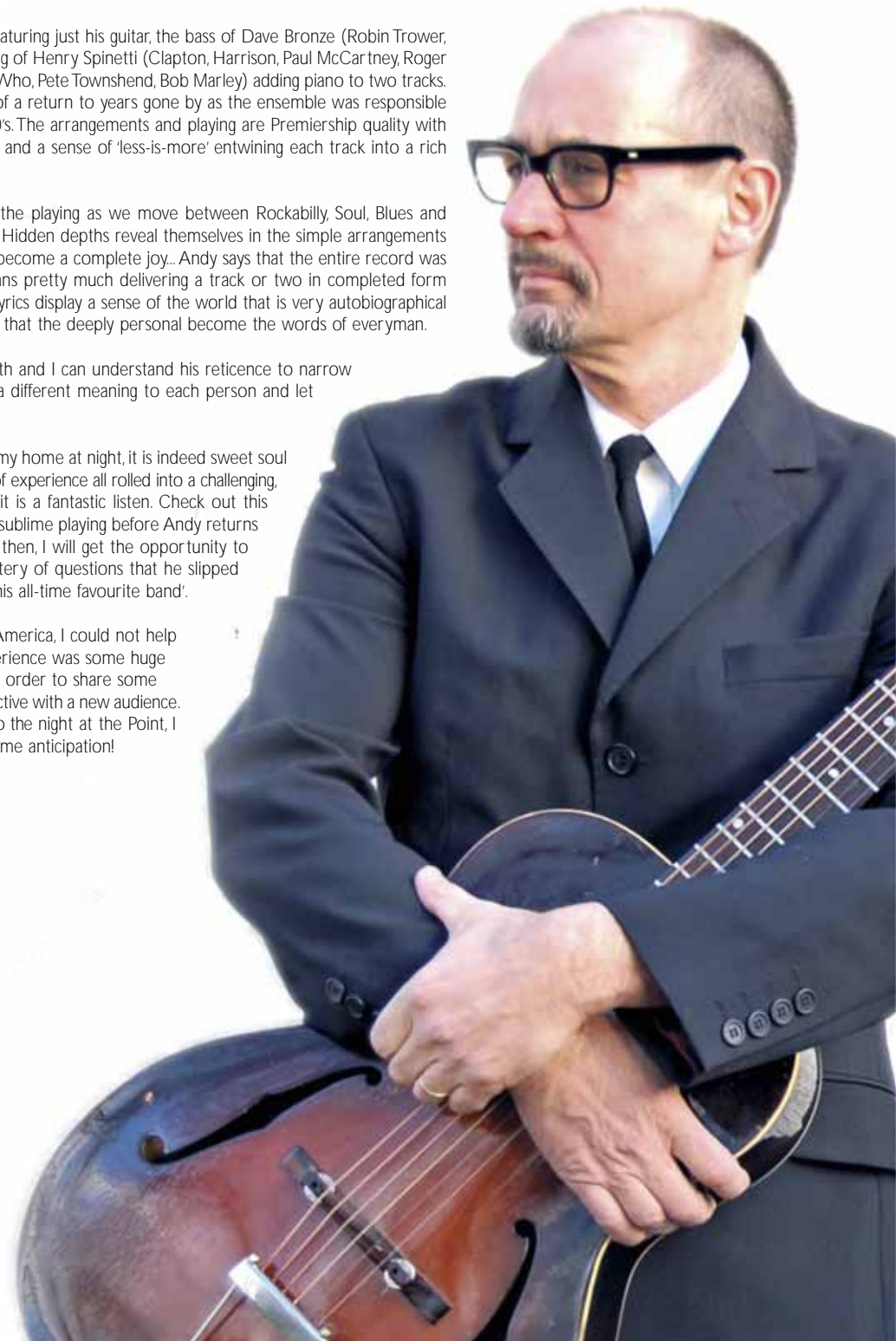
There is so much warmth and space in the playing as we move between Rockabilly, Soul, Blues and gospel-tinged Ballads with effortless ease. Hidden depths reveal themselves in the simple arrangements with repeated listening and the 14 songs become a complete joy.. Andy says that the entire record was recorded in just 10 days with the musicians pretty much delivering a track or two in completed form each day before the money ran out. The lyrics display a sense of the world that is very autobiographical and yet Andy writes with such cleverness that the deeply personal become the words of everyman.

Andy is reluctant to explain songs in depth and I can understand his reticence to narrow the listener experience. The songs carry a different meaning to each person and let us keep the mystery alive at all costs!!

So, when I play the songs in the quiet of my home at night, it is indeed sweet soul music. It is years on the road and decades of experience all rolled into a challenging, yet softly whispering record. Most of all, it is a fantastic listen. Check out this undiscovered gem and bone up on some sublime playing before Andy returns to these shores later in the year. Perhaps then, I will get the opportunity to speak at length with him and ask the battery of questions that he slipped beyond: like 'Who would he recruit into his all-time favourite band'.

As he ran for another flight, this time to America, I could not help wondering if the Roger Waters tour experience was some huge elephant that Andy longed to climb off, in order to share some quieter gems of gentle song writing perspective with a new audience. As the noise of the Dublin crowd faded into the night at the Point, I found myself awaiting his next gig with some anticipation!

Interview by Paul McGee



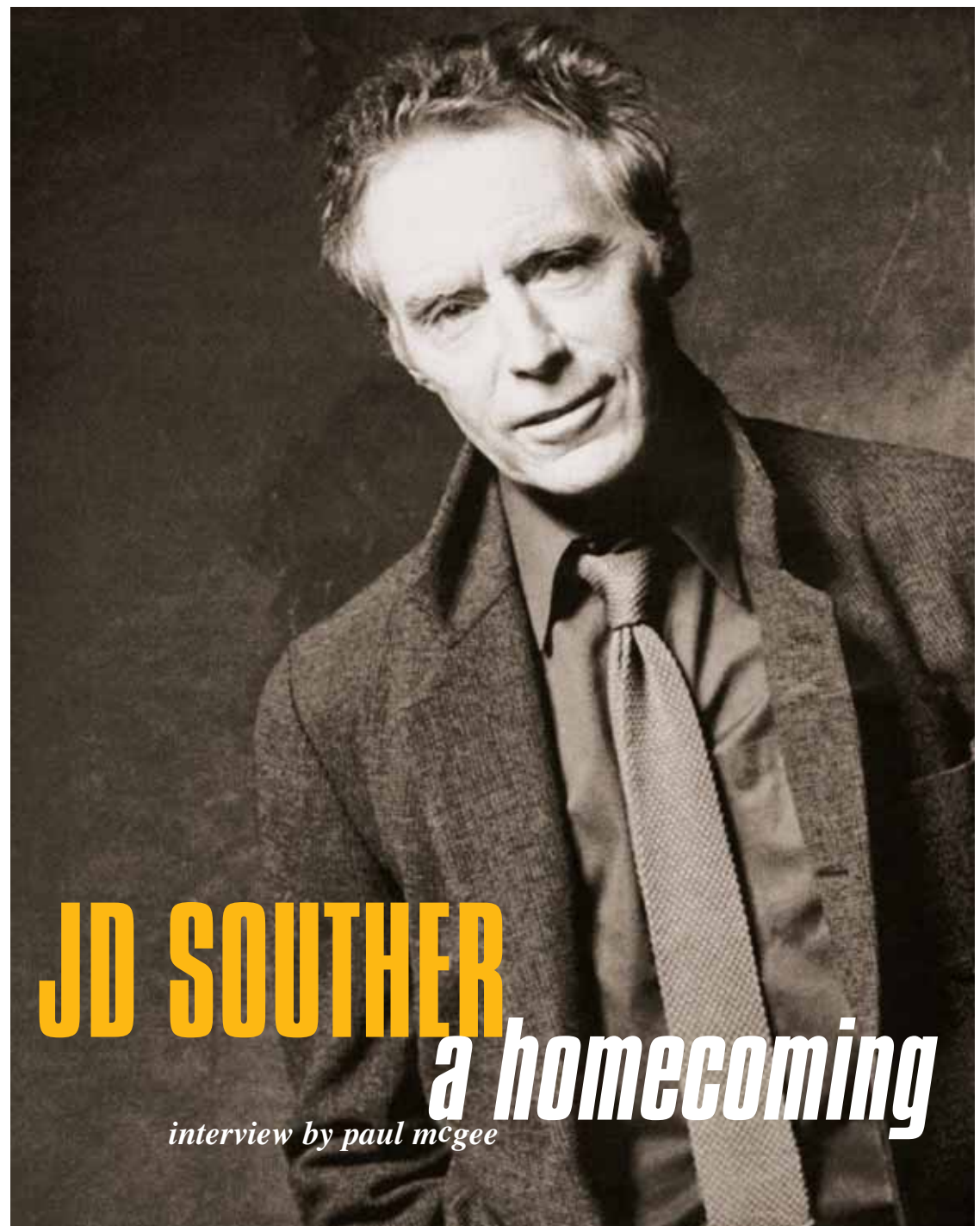
J.D. Souther has always ploughed a lone furrow as a singer/songwriter. To an outsider, it may seem a lonely existence but when you are on the inside looking out, surrounded by a coterie of musical talent to spark your creative instincts, then it is a little like coming home after a long day's journey into night. No endless schedule of tour dates to stunt the creative muse, no trying to keep a relationship on the tracks while most of the days you veer close to the hard shoulder of life on the road. In leaving that endless circuit and nether world to others, J.D. Souther has gotten on with the business of listening to his inner voice and turning out a body of work over 3 decades that has long been admired and held in the highest esteem in an industry where creative artists are thrown to the lions more often than not.

It has been over 20 years since the source behind many of songs that fuelled the 70's California sound has appeared, either in a live setting, or on record. However, the time has come to welcome back a key influence from his sojourn away from the media glare and to enjoy again the talents that have earned a reputation and respect that has endured over the intervening years. Quite simply, J.D. Souther is as close to a living legend as it gets for any of us who remember the 70's and survived the years in between; growing pains and all.

The time difference between Dublin and Nashville is 6 hours and when I call JD Souther he is in the middle of his morning on the farm that he tends with his Irish wife and their daughter. His last recording was 1984's 'Home Before Dawn' and when I ask if he ever did actually make it 'home' after all these years, he replies that he now gets to bed early and rises before dawn. An interesting juxtaposition on a life that has known many wonderful moments while growing up in L.A. surrounded by a collective of friends and songwriters that included Jackson Browne, Don Henley, Glen Frey, Warren Zevon, Linda Ronstadt, Waddy Watchell and a host of others. Talking with him brings alive the energy and excitement of a time when such diverse creativity was overflowing and resulted in some timeless songs that we all know and love.

JD Souther is a very generous, warm person on the telephone and has no reluctance in fielding my many questions. He answers with both openness and wisdom, born of the years of honing his song writing craft, whether in collaboration with other artists or as a solo artist, which is his great preference.

I ask him to talk about the upcoming tour of Ireland and England and he enthuses over the opportunity to get up in front of a live audience again. When I ask him to comment on the urge to return to live performance after all these years away from the stage, he simply says 'I missed it'.



JD SOUTHER

a homecoming

interview by paul mcgee

Far from this tour being a chance to play all the old songs back to back and get to everybody's favourite in the audience, J.D. will be trying to cover all parts of his career and will also be playing new songs from an upcoming cd; his first release in over 20 years. There is quite a departure in terms of the overall sound in that the new release is with a small jazz ensemble, very horn based and recalling the sound of late 50's & early 60's jazz with a Miles Davis / John Coltrane feel. J.D.'s voice will still have that unique quality to melt butter in its delivery and as he says 'no matter what I do, I still sound like me'. The new arrangements are very jazz influenced with some top players from different parts of the USA appearing.

There will also be a compilation of his 4 solo records released shortly and an EP of new songs will be available at the shows. He had 1,000 printed and sees the live shows as the ideal distribution channel to get the new songs heard.

Our telephone conversation lasted a long time and what follows are the most interesting snippets of information and insight that any long-time admirer of his creative muse would want to read.

In 2002, you moved from L.A. to Nashville. Was this a lifestyle choice or was it work influenced?

It was a little bit of both. Many of my friends were living in Nashville and L.A. was getting so crowded. Life was going very well for me there but I was spending hours in the car, stuck in traffic, so I decided to relocate for awhile to Nashville and see how things went. I was writing with Rodney Crowell and Beth Nielsen Chapman and then I spent some time in Ireland working on a book of poetry. While I was there I met my wife. We stayed a few months but eventually decided to try Tennessee and happily everything has worked out really well since. I live on a 10 acre farm with my family and my dogs and life is really good.

You were quoted as saying that a Democracy was a good political system to live in but not a good way to make art?

For me that is true. Sometimes it can work well in collaboration but you reach a point where you ask what will work in a song and you want to go in a different direction. Some of the people I wrote with made the process easy because we were already friends. Glen Frey, Don Henley and Jackson Browne worked really well as a group of writers but with others you sometimes just have to walk away. Like Bob Dylan, who came over to my house with the intention of writing something, but it just didn't happen. We hung out and tried some things but in the end we just talked and played with my dogs. You have to know when its not working and just keep it amicable.

That's also why I don't do requests when performing onstage. I have already made up my mind what I want to play - a defined route in my mind that will work once I begin the show and when that engine starts I just want to run with it. People shouting for songs can disturb that and as Merle Haggard once said when I saw him play at the Troubadour, 'I am not a jukebox'. I try to give real value for money to everybody but it is impossible to cover all the songs. Linda Ronstadt once said 'When you play to a room greater than 10 people then all you are really doing is surfing between hits'.

This tour is purely solo?

Yes, just me and a few Gibson guitars. It is a chance for me to get my feet wet again and to see what songs work and what songs don't. If I then tour with a band in the future, the ground work has been done to a degree. When I tour with a band then the pressure to sing every minute can be removed by the ensemble playing and my voice can rest.

In the song-writing process, what happens?

There is no one methodology. Sometimes it is simply sitting at the piano and seeing what comes. Other times it is just scribbling ideas in a notebook. I am a great admirer of arrangers and my early influences included Gil Evans, Bill Evans, Maynard Ferguson, Ray Charles & Quincy Jones.

When you look back at the 70's with today's perspective, do you think that the insular nature of your song-writing community and the culture of drugs impacted in a negative way on the quality of the work?

I get a perspective in a number of different ways when looking back. We were a diverse group of individuals from many different musical backgrounds. We came from different parts of America and each brought an influence in musical terms. I can never underestimate the role that Linda Ronstadt played in terms of our relationship. She may not have written any of the songs but she was instrumental in getting a number of them finished. Also, her vast knowledge of country music was a huge influence. We would play each other records and I would play her Frank Sinatra or Dave Brubeck while she would play me a Louvin Bros song. Equally, Waddy Watchell was into Reggae music before any of us knew what it was. Jackson Browne and Judee Sill were so far ahead in terms of folk writing; they were very accomplished. Glen Frey was into rhythm n' blues and Warren Zevon was influenced by many different musical backgrounds; he was also classically trained. We were very supportive of each other, even if there should have been an air of competition.

In terms of today, do you see your writing reflect the increasing political influence of America on the World?

In my songs I have always written about alienation. In terms of the global view on life, I have found that recently I am looking at the larger context and not just personal relationships. I hate bigotry in any form. Some of the new songs are more focused on the times we live in.

J.D. Souther is a man with a long list of collaborations and song-writing credits to his name. Some of the artists included on the list are;

The Eagles, Linda Ronstadt, Chris Hillman, Richie Furay, Bonnie Raitt, Roy Orbison, Randy Newman, Brian Wilson, James Taylor, Clannad, George Strait, Lowell George, Christopher Cross

J.D. Souther has also branched out from the confines of the 'singer-songwriter' definition. His life experience has seen him embrace acting roles in both film and television. He played a role in the TV drama 'Thirtysomething' and also played a part in the film 'Always' with Richard Dreyfuss in which he sang the classic Platters hit 'Smoke Gets in your Eyes'. J.D. also appeared in the 'Postcards from the Edge' film starring Jack Nicholson and Shirley McLean.

He has also written a book of poetry but continues to avoid the spotlight that many of his friends have indulged in. He could have been a member of the Eagles but turned it down, only to have his name repeatedly mentioned by them and other recording artists whose lives he has influenced.

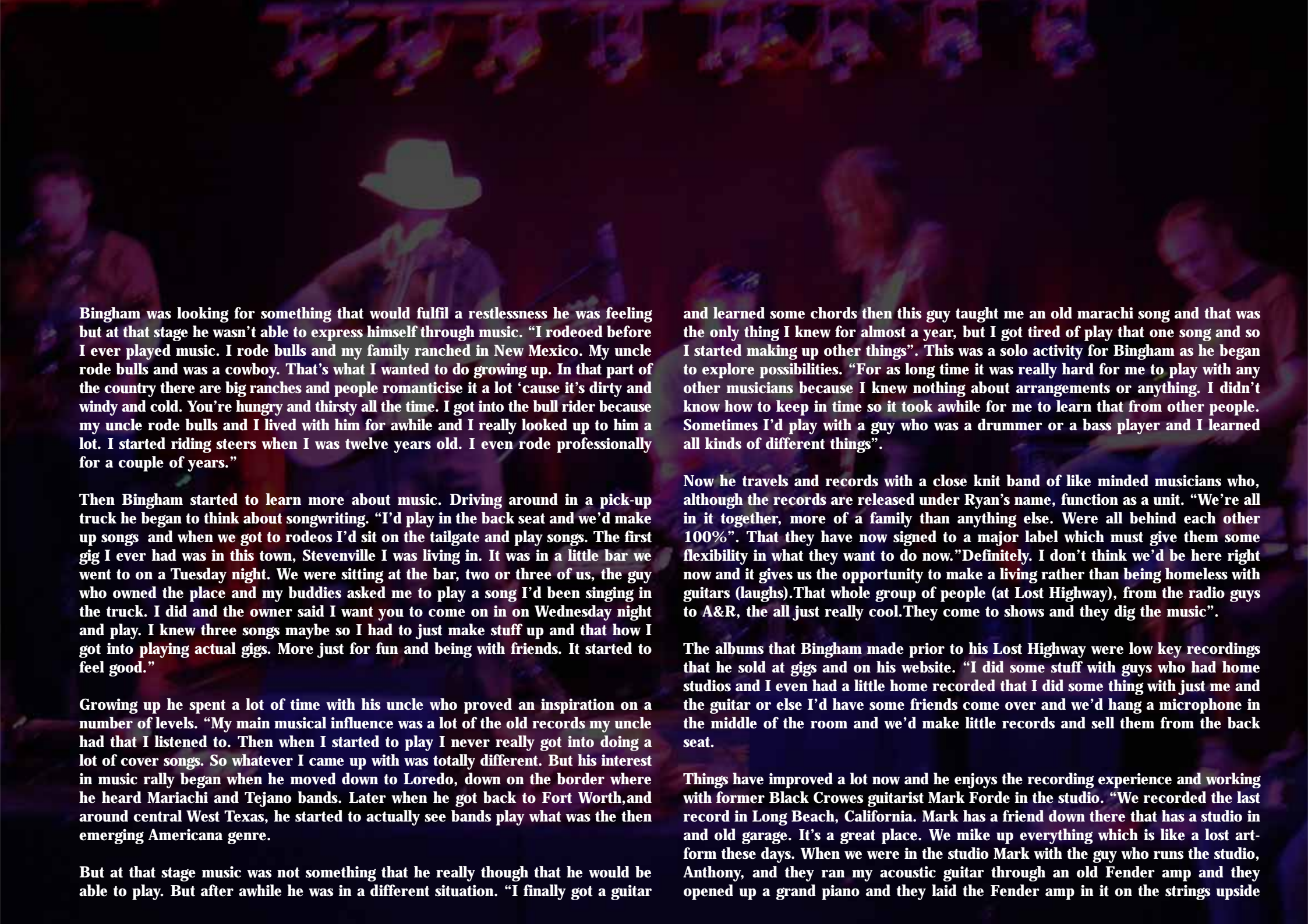
In closing, I like a quote from a previous article I researched that goes; 'I do like the idea of getting up in the morning and just getting on a horse and riding fences, instead of answering the phone...' And isn't this just where we started this conversation in the first place.



RYAN BINGHAM

RIDING DOWN THE LOST HIGHWAY

At 25 Ryan Bingham has lived the kind of life that could easily be romanticized, especially to anyone living in an often wet and windswept Ireland and even more so if the westerns that viewed growing up or the music they like is in any way related to Texas and its outlaw traditions. He grew up in a household that was not exactly the most stable of environments as Bingham reflects "My parents go to drinking at a very early age. Me and my sister kinda did our own thing". That experience eventually found an expression in the music he began to write. "A lot of the reason I got into writing songs was to express these things. It stuff you don't really talk about and it comes out instead in a song, whether you realise it or not. Now, though, I think I've grown up a little bit over that and I'm concentrating on things that are going on in the world now. Things that happen to me now not the... well my parents did this or whatever, Everybody has hard times."

A man wearing a cowboy hat and a dark shirt is playing an acoustic guitar on a stage. He is looking down at his instrument. In the background, other musicians are partially visible, including one with a guitar and another with a drum set. The stage is lit with warm, yellowish light.

Bingham was looking for something that would fulfil a restlessness he was feeling but at that stage he wasn't able to express himself through music. "I rodeoed before I ever played music. I rode bulls and my family ranched in New Mexico. My uncle rode bulls and was a cowboy. That's what I wanted to do growing up. In that part of the country there are big ranches and people romanticise it a lot 'cause it's dirty and windy and cold. You're hungry and thirsty all the time. I got into the bull rider because my uncle rode bulls and I lived with him for awhile and I really looked up to him a lot. I started riding steers when I was twelve years old. I even rode professionally for a couple of years."

Then Bingham started to learn more about music. Driving around in a pick-up truck he began to think about songwriting. "I'd play in the back seat and we'd make up songs and when we got to rodeos I'd sit on the tailgate and play songs. The first gig I ever had was in this town, Stevenville I was living in. It was in a little bar we went to on a Tuesday night. We were sitting at the bar, two or three of us, the guy who owned the place and my buddies asked me to play a song I'd been singing in the truck. I did and the owner said I want you to come on in on Wednesday night and play. I knew three songs maybe so I had to just make stuff up and that how I got into playing actual gigs. More just for fun and being with friends. It started to feel good."

Growing up he spent a lot of time with his uncle who proved an inspiration on a number of levels. "My main musical influence was a lot of the old records my uncle had that I listened to. Then when I started to play I never really got into doing a lot of cover songs. So whatever I came up with was totally different. But his interest in music really began when he moved down to Laredo, down on the border where he heard Mariachi and Tejano bands. Later when he got back to Fort Worth, and around central West Texas, he started to actually see bands play what was the then emerging Americana genre.

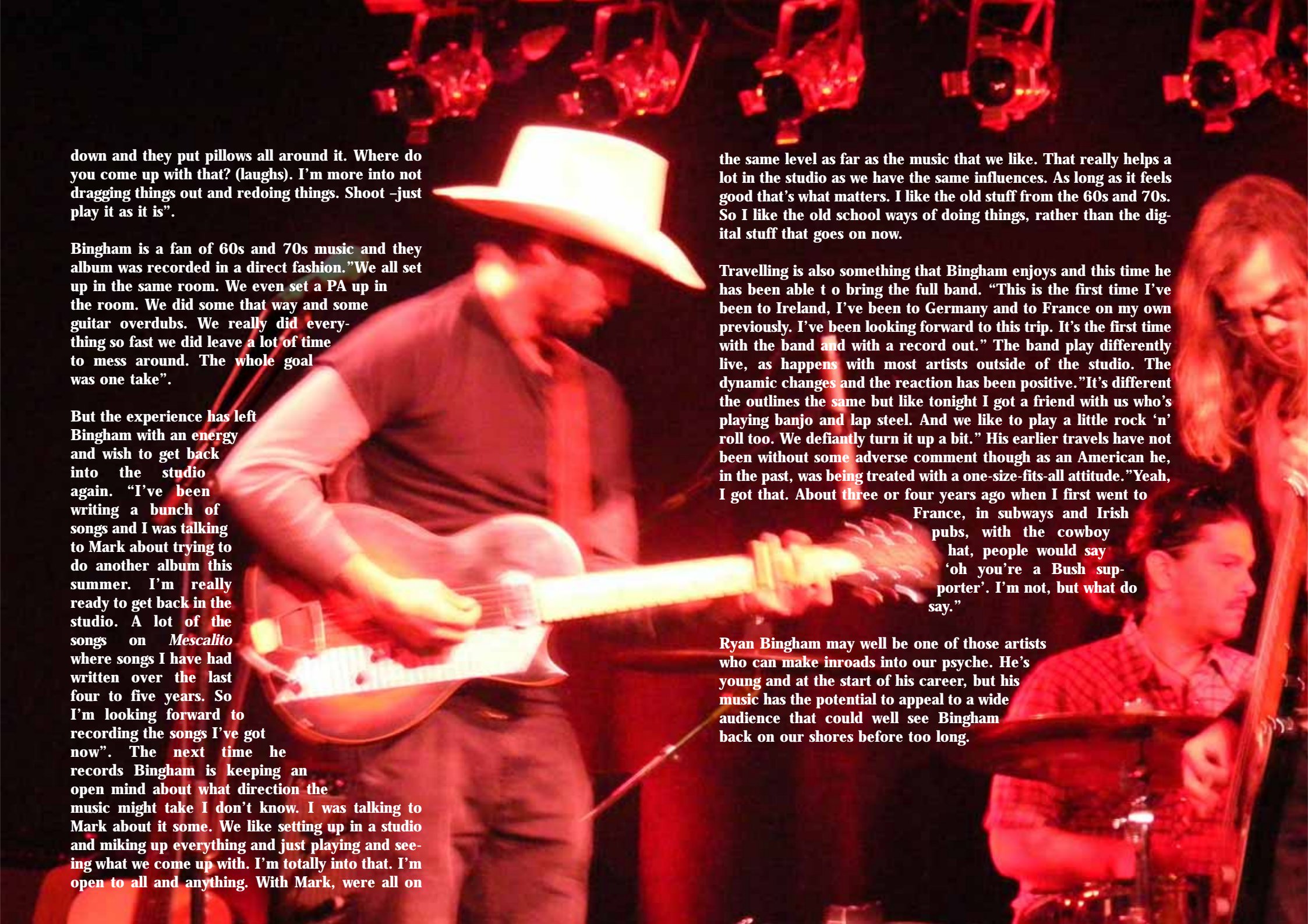
But at that stage music was not something that he really thought that he would be able to play. But after awhile he was in a different situation. "I finally got a guitar

and learned some chords then this guy taught me an old marachi song and that was the only thing I knew for almost a year, but I got tired of play that one song and so I started making up other things". This was a solo activity for Bingham as he began to explore possibilities. "For as long time it was really hard for me to play with any other musicians because I knew nothing about arrangements or anything. I didn't know how to keep in time so it took awhile for me to learn that from other people. Sometimes I'd play with a guy who was a drummer or a bass player and I learned all kinds of different things".

Now he travels and records with a close knit band of like minded musicians who, although the records are released under Ryan's name, function as a unit. "We're all in it together, more of a family than anything else. Were all behind each other 100%". That they have now signed to a major label which must give them some flexibility in what they want to do now."Definitely. I don't think we'd be here right now and it gives us the opportunity to make a living rather than being homeless with guitars (laughs).That whole group of people (at Lost Highway), from the radio guys to A&R, the all just really cool.They come to shows and they dig the music".

The albums that Bingham made prior to his Lost Highway were low key recordings that he sold at gigs and on his website. "I did some stuff with guys who had home studios and I even had a little home recorded that I did some thing with just me and the guitar or else I'd have some friends come over and we'd hang a microphone in the middle of the room and we'd make little records and sell them from the back seat.

Things have improved a lot now and he enjoys the recording experience and working with former Black Crowes guitarist Mark Forde in the studio. "We recorded the last record in Long Beach, California. Mark has a friend down there that has a studio in and old garage. It's a great place. We mike up everything which is like a lost art-form these days. When we were in the studio Mark with the guy who runs the studio, Anthony, and they ran my acoustic guitar through an old Fender amp and they opened up a grand piano and they laid the Fender amp in it on the strings upside



down and they put pillows all around it. Where do you come up with that? (laughs). I'm more into not dragging things out and redoing things. Shoot -just play it as it is".

Bingham is a fan of 60s and 70s music and they album was recorded in a direct fashion. "We all set up in the same room. We even set a PA up in the room. We did some that way and some guitar overdubs. We really did everything so fast we did leave a lot of time to mess around. The whole goal was one take".

But the experience has left Bingham with an energy and wish to get back into the studio again. "I've been writing a bunch of songs and I was talking to Mark about trying to do another album this summer. I'm really ready to get back in the studio. A lot of the songs on *Mescalito* where songs I have had written over the last four to five years. So I'm looking forward to recording the songs I've got now". The next time he records Bingham is keeping an open mind about what direction the music might take I don't know. I was talking to Mark about it some. We like setting up in a studio and miking up everything and just playing and seeing what we come up with. I'm totally into that. I'm open to all and anything. With Mark, were all on

the same level as far as the music that we like. That really helps a lot in the studio as we have the same influences. As long as it feels good that's what matters. I like the old stuff from the 60s and 70s. So I like the old school ways of doing things, rather than the digital stuff that goes on now.

Travelling is also something that Bingham enjoys and this time he has been able to bring the full band. "This is the first time I've been to Ireland, I've been to Germany and to France on my own previously. I've been looking forward to this trip. It's the first time with the band and with a record out." The band play differently live, as happens with most artists outside of the studio. The dynamic changes and the reaction has been positive. "It's different the outlines the same but like tonight I got a friend with us who's playing banjo and lap steel. And we like to play a little rock 'n' roll too. We defiantly turn it up a bit." His earlier travels have not been without some adverse comment though as an American he, in the past, was being treated with a one-size-fits-all attitude. "Yeah, I got that. About three or four years ago when I first went to France, in subways and Irish pubs, with the cowboy hat, people would say 'oh you're a Bush supporter'. I'm not, but what do say."

Ryan Bingham may well be one of those artists who can make inroads into our psyche. He's young and at the start of his career, but his music has the potential to appeal to a wide audience that could well see Bingham back on our shores before too long.

TIFT MERRITT

ANOTHER COUNTRY IN ANOTHER TOWN

Sitting in the Dublin hotel coffee shop Tift Merritt comes across as a warm and open person, one who will talk willingly and honestly about the things that have affected her life in recent times. She is small of stature but big in spirit and personality. She tells of how she relied on close friends like Zeke Hutchins, who has been with her from the start as her drummer and confidant, to help her get through the recent professional turmoil that saw her dropped by her previous label Lost Highway and about her need to escape to a safer haven to write. Much of the *Another Country* was written in a relaxed and low key way in a small apartment in Paris.

That the majority of this album songs were presented to the label, and rejected, is puzzling and shows that those at such labels have no more idea of what will succeed or seel than you or I. Ironically she is still within the overall Universal Music Group and is meeting the press here in Dublin at the Westbury Hotel. This is something that has not escaped her, but you feel she would be equally at home in a less grand setting. We began by talking about our last interview wherein she had mentioned then that she had wanted to record with George Drakoulis again and that she would like to spend some time writing in Paris, both of which she ended up doing. "It was really fun" was how she felt about working with the producer again. And on the writing process she felt that "it was a really personal process and it was a means to an end. I just went to Paris on a vacation and I ended up staying for awhile, so what happened was really natural. It was a pretty introspective time."



On the album she worked with her core live band as well as with guitarists Charlie Sexton and Doug Pettibone. When it comes to touring I wondered if she had settled on a line up for that purpose. “It will be Zeke, Jay and Danny, who are on the album, and I’ll have a new guitar player from North Carolina coming out on the road with us. His name is Scott McCaul, he played with the Two Dollar Pistols. Our previous player Brad Rice is playing with Keith Urban now. It will be a five piece, with lots of singing, as Scott is also a good singer.”

She is now working with the Concord Music Group on the Fantasy label, maybe the idea of being on the same label with John Fogerty was incentive enough. “Well Lost Highway dropped me. They did what they needed to do. I really like where I am now though.” However she felt the she had kept up her end of the deal. “For my part I worked really hard.”

We talked about the independent sector as at the time she was dropped she wasn’t sure in which way the next record would come out. “I think that we are in an atmosphere where you totally have to customise your career. I just decided that I wasn’t ready to run my own label. Zeke and I went through a lot of changes, we’d been nominated for a Grammy but we didn’t sell records. So we ended up taking back all our business ourselves. There was a time before this record was made where we had no manager, no label and we actually didn’t even have a lawyer. We had decided that we were going to run our career from there on out ourselves, making what was important to us happen.”

The decision was made to go ahead with the writing and to then see where it would lead them. “Well that was a less certain time and the album was further down the line. We went to all the meetings by ourselves and from that we decided where we wanted to be. A lot of people probably thought that we were crazy. The singer and the drummer (the aforementioned long time friend and touring companion Zeke Hutchins) going to these meetings (laughs). Anyway we did it the way we felt best. There are so many options now and at the time we didn’t have enough money to put out a record at the level that we would have wanted and to publicise it too. We loved the people at Fantasy just as people. And from an artistic point of view we liked the company, so we wanted to partner with them. Eventually we found another manager and we had a situation that felt right but on our terms. I do think that it all about what strengths you, as a person, have. It’s like life, there’s not a right or wrong any more in this business. If there ever was one to begin with (laughs).”

Listening to the final album and how strong it sounds it is strange that her former label didn’t see the potential in the songs she was writing. “I had come home with a lot of songs, a big body of work. I knew I was working towards something. I went back and forth to Paris and I kept honing it. I actually turned in almost the whole album to Lost Highway but they decided that they didn’t want it. (Said with an air of disappointment) But, in the end it didn’t matter as I felt strongly enough about these songs and that they had looked after me. Because I knew my job was to look after them (laughs).”

When she played here last Zeke was working as her tour manager as well as percussionist and seems to be an integral part of the Tift Merritt set-up. “He is the lifeline for sure. All of the things that he does allow me to go off my myself. He was enormously involved. It funny I notice now that even my guitar playing is locking in with him as a drummer, even when he’s not there.

The other country of the album title would appear to be not so much a physical location as much as a place within herself where she could find the peace that she was seeking. “Did I ever get to another country? A good question, the idea of another country is somewhere better,

somewhere happier. I certainly am in a better place. I thought about people being countries too. Sometimes emotionally, and in other ways, we can seem to be in a different country.”

The conversation turned to how she translated the experiences that she encountered into song. “Well I was a writer long before I was a musician. So it means a lot to me. I wouldn’t get up onstage if I didn’t believe in what I was saying. It true to say that I draw from what goes on around me and within me. On this record because I was in Paris on my own, away from everyone, my life could spill into it without ever having that self-awareness that says maybe I shouldn’t talk about this. It’s nice to know now that I can let go and nobody is going to get hurt. I’ve always sifted through my thoughts. I’m not an expert on anyone else.”

The album could have taken a much fuller, brass laden outwardly soul direction or even a harder rockin’ route as these were all avenues that were explored in the past. “Yes, it is gentler. Sonically it’s definitely a quieter record. Sometimes my records have been influenced by what I’ve been going through and I’d been on the road so long. I was really tired of that show business thing that you sometimes just fall into when your on the road. So I wanted it to be more of an invitation. Like “here’s my hand put in your hand”. I didn’t want it to be in your face. I want it to reveal in a quiet and not forceful way.”

We talked about how the life of the working artist meant that sacrifices were going to be required for the upcoming musician as a necessity of being a working musician. “Yeah, it’s really hard. That why I needed to go to Paris, to live simple. Not to worry about what to wear. You end up becoming a bit of a monkey even though you try your damnest not to. You’re point of view is so different as you’re the performer and all eyes are on you. As a writer either your eyes are extremely far in or you end up watching everyone else, on the road you have to work really hard to have a relationship that’s on equal footing. Otherwise it’s “oh, I’m the performer and you are the audience who have paid to get in”. There not a lot of purity and you hang out together every day because that what we have to do.” But the exchange that can happen between an artist with a new audience or some one who you might could also be interesting. “Absolutely, it can be really freeing. Every job has it’s hazards.”

The audiences in European can be quite different in how they perceive the music in that they are often going to react to an American performer. “The main thing is that I just like Europe (laughs). I’d love to spend all my time over here. I haven’t been to that many countries but there’s always something new and beautiful when you go to a new country. In Norway and Sweden I couldn’t believe that everyone spoke English and new the words. What a huge compliment that was. In Scotland and Ireland, which I find slightly similar, is that fair? there is a warmth and a passion for the music. I really love being in those two places.”

An audience expectations must be difficult in the notion that the person on stage is ‘the star’. “Sometimes it is. I’d be lying if I didn’t say that sometimes you think that this is the silliest job. There something presumptuous about going on stage and thinking that everyone wants to look at you. I think that I have an intensity as a person that allows me to enjoy the focus of performing. But probably by nature I’m really introverted. There is something really special about the stage, this place where you can play your emotions out on at any intensity that you want and it’s safe. That’s great. You think “I got to but that energy somewhere”. When there is a great exchange of heart between the artist and the audience you want to give more. I think to a certain extent a good crowd or a bad crowd doesn’t neutralize what being a performer and being on the road is about.

The time a touring artist spends outside of America must make for a viewpoint that allows for a different perspective. “Of course. And that was the “freedom fries” moment where I thought this is going to be really funny. I mean Nashville isn’t always the most open minded place but that’s not who I am. I do find a sense of where I’m from when I come to new places. I was really bummed out when I was touring in parts of America where everything is the same. France, to me reminded be of parts of North Carolina that I love. There were also a couple of subtle things that made me feel comfortable and open, where everyone lives in the street with their windows open in Europe. In America you have a yard and it’s carefully manicured and you close your doors and you try to show that everything that happens inside your house is perfect, whether it is or not.”

I opinioned that that is a trait that may well not be exclusive to America, with Ireland becoming more like that as the soul of the country becomes sapped by more superficial aims and ambitions. Tift Merritt though has spent enough time outside of her home country to be aware of such things. “I thought how can I go back to America as I’d loved seeing my neighbours across the way in Paris. There was this openness that was very human. There is still this artisanal, ‘Is that a word?’, society where people take pride in things. America is about mass marketing and that seems to devalue craft and what I do. There’s a man arranging his cheeses there in Paris while I’m working on one particular line. I felt that we had something in common (laughs).”

Given all the travelling involved is there a place that Tift Merritt would call home. “Well I’m not living in Nashville. I live in New York. I only went to Nashville because Lost Highway was there, but I never lived there. I do feel tied to my Kitty Wells records but Nashville’s a weird place for me. I love being in New York because a lot of things influence music, great paintings, leftist thinking, abstract films, whatever. But in Nashville there is a lot of committee song-writing. They would say “you’re an ok songwriter but you should write with other people.” I’m thinking you don’t get what I do’. You have people that you make things with and it should happen naturally.”

Most artists can write under different circumstances but each has their own way to approach the way that do write, a favourite way to let their muse come. “For me it always changes. Usually I have an idea that good enough to hold onto. A feeling, or a part of a lyric. Then I think that I should write a song about that. A little phrase and I hope that the music comes with it too. A little note on paper or something. The one thing that I usually do is that I’ll get the music down. I’ll make a structure, get the melody and the chords. I’ll let the words slide.” Writing on both guitar and piano can by the nature of the instruments lead a song down a different path. “They are really different. The piano everberates and all of that hits you. You feel so clocked into something. I understand the piano a lot better than the guitar. I’m a rhythm player so the guitar lend itself to that. The piano is really open but if I get lost with that openness then I’ll switch to guitar. So if I need something simple to fall back on I’ll use that. It’s always a process of balance.”

At that point there was a knock on the door and Tift’s next interviewee was ready, so we ended our conversation with this amusing and thoughtful singer/songwriter who will be back on these shores for the Kilkenny Rhythm and Roots Weekend. The dates for which are available on their website. Both gig and new album are highly recommended.

TRACKS ON THE HIGHWAY

Brad Paisley **5th Gear** Arista

Often considered one of the more traditionally-minded of Nashville's mainstream artists Paisley has made a series of solid albums that show off his skills as singer, songwriter and guitarist and that his heart is in the right place. However there is something about his music that never quite connects in the way that I would with someone, from a similar place, like Gary Allen. And I have to say this his last two CD covers have been among the worst I've seen from a major label. This one has one of the most unreadable lyric and credit sheets I've come across. Maybe Brad should stick to the music. Which, it has to be said is, in the main, good. The duet with Carrie Underwood (*Oh Love*) is much closer to her overblown pop end of the spectrum. On the plus side the opening *All I Wanted Was A Car* bounces along with verve. He can also handle a ballad like *With You, Without You* well. While the all boys together slightly forced fun of the New Kung Pao Buckaroos track *Bigger Fish To Fry* which features Little Jimmie Dickens, 'Whisperin' Bill Anderson and Vince Gill is fine but a little too polite. Overall Brad Paisley needs some more grit in his music. There's no doubting Paisley's overall talent and country credentials and the fact that his fans (and there are many) will enjoy this but next time out maybe a little salt with the sugar.

Jason Ringenberg **Best Tracks and Side Tracks** Yep Roc

It has been said, not least by Jason himself, that he is not the world's greatest singer or guitarist. That opinion undermines his strengths and charisma as a performer and as a songwriter. This compilation of his solo career highlights, rerecording of earlier songs, rarities and a smattering of live tracks are testament to his strengths and skills. He is a recognisable and distinctive singer and a songwriter who has always had his roots in traditional country music while never losing sight of what is happening musically around him. Neither should the very major contribution of George Bradfute be overlooked they have, who along with a number of excellent contributors, forged a musical bedrock that Jason built on and explored. He is also a songwriter who can take a specific theme (often historical) and create a song that lives and breathes. Here we have such examples as *Chief Joseph's Last Dream* and *Tuskegee Pride*. There are the songs written for his daughters *Camille* and *Addie Rose*, which are tender and true. There are outside songs such as *Born To Run*, written by Paul Kennerly or *Rainbow Stew* from Merle Haggard's pen as well as the previously unreleased version of Tom T Hall's *Who's Gonna Feed Them Hogs?* As well as his own career highlights such as songs previously recorded with the Scorchers *Broken Whiskey Glass* and *Bible And A Gun* – a duet with co-writer Steve Earle. Thirty tracks for his thirty years as a professional singer and country/punk innovator. Jason Ringenberg deserves his place in the spotlight, even if he performs on a smaller stage. Here's to the next thirty Jason. www.jasonringenberg.com

Loomer ***Songs Of The Wild West Island*** Newtown

This fine album got lost when heading for the review section of the last issue but shouldn't be overlooked. The songs written by singer, guitarist Scott Loomer have strong melodic tendencies matched by strong playing and production - by the band

and Locksley Taylor. Alt. country/Americana is where it roughly situates itself in the overall scheme of things but potentially could find favour with a wider audience. The songs range in tempo and intensity but are never less than satisfying in their delivery. Listen to *Only Lovers*, wherein Loomer duets with Sarah Hamer on an understand, keyboard-led song that is high on emotion and striking vocally. That contrasts nicely with the earthier tones of songs like *Old Grey Ford* where a banjo sets the tone or the full on drive of *Dirt Angel* that has some twanging guitar at its heart. A sound that also inhabits *Pull Me In* which also has some sterling pedal steel from guest Jim Whitford. In fact there are no duds among the twelve songs that make up *Songs Of The West Islands*. Making Loomer a band to watch and to discover. Catch them at www.loomeronline.com

Jim Lauderdale & The Dream Players ***Honey Songs*** Yep Roc

The prolific and purposeful writing of Jim Lauderdale seems to have found a perfect partner in the Yep Roc label who do not shy away from releasing albums at a frequency that major labels can't match. Following on from the Grammy award winning *Bluegrass Diaries* comes this latest release, one of a number of projects that Jim Lauderdale is always working on. The Dream Players are the legendary team of James Burton, Glen D Hardin, Ron Tutt, know for their work with Elvis Presley and Gram Parsons amongst others. Alongside co-producer Al Perkins (with Lauderdale and Tim Coats), Garry Tallent and Steve Sheehan and guests like old buddy Buddy Miller, Emmylou Harris, Patty Loveless and others. The ten songs, all but one solo written by Lauderdale, that being the final song *I'm Almost Back* which is a co-write with Leslie Satcher, one of his regular co-writers. The increasing skill as an assured and soulful vocalist that he has shown over recent releases is again evident, as is his ease with such revered players. The playing is never less than inspiring and, as such, makes this one of Lauderdale's finest efforts to date. His prolific writing has not lessened his quality control and the song are full of his trademark melodic twist and vocal nuances that make him such a distinctive songwriter and vocalist. That these skills have been largely unrecognised by Music Row and the country charts and radio should no longer concern him. His work, to a degree, is its own reward and those who recognise his talents will find much to savour here. His *Honey Songs* are a tasty confection and this is just one more stop on the road to personal success. www.jimlaurerdale.com

Tift Merritt ***Another Country*** Fantasy

After being dropped by Lost Highway Tift Merritt has found a new home at Fantasy Records, the home of John Fogerty. The intervening time has seen Merritt use the time to good advantage writing some more personal songs and taking stock of her life and her aims. All this makes *Another Country* her finest album to date, a relaxed and soulful exploration of love, loss and life overall. There are many highlights on this George Drakoulis produced album, which is still broadly Americana based, one of which is *Broken*. A song that reflects on the way a spirit can rebound after being bruised and damaged. Her life affirming vocal tops a vibrant and memorable musical setting that, throughout the album, shows a lighter touch in perfect harmony with the mood and the direction of the music. The main revelation is Merritt's own vocal skill which, here, is immense, showing her as one of the best around today. There is an understated soulfulness that doesn't rely on there been an overblown use of a capital S on that form to make it work. If you want proof of that then listen to the title track to hear how she exhibits strength and vulnerability, power and passion. Lets hope that Tift Merritt's other country, the country of the heart, as much as of any particular location, will have as many visitors as it deserves. www.tiftmerritt.com

Joe Turner ***Real Things*** HumpHead

From the school of Randy Travis straight-up but mainstream country Turner's lyrical themes are solidly within the acceptable genre guidelines. None more so than the opening title track which set the tone for what continues. Produced by Mark Wright and Brent Rowan it is a solid and enjoyable, if predictable and safe outing. The song choices are largely from Music Row's current set of contenders, Turner's not a writer, only having a hand in co-writing one song. But at the end of the album on the only Rowan self-produced track Turner shows that he could be that much more interesting with song like the Blaze Foley written *If I Could Only Fly*, a song that rises above the carefully-crafted tone of the other songs to give some real expression of desire. It also features a duet with Lee Ann Womack and outshines everything else on the album. Turner is a

satisfying singer who's music will doubtless please many but shows that given some more meaty material that he could really make some music that matters.

Buck Owens ***Live from Austin*** New West

This performance, recorded in October 1988, shows latter day Buck in fine style. It's not classic Buckaroos, but the band performs well and gives Buck a strident backing. This set is full of classic songs like *Act Naturally*, *Crying Time*, *Tiger By The Tail* and *Under Your Spell Again* (with Dwight Yoakam) and confirm Buck's rightful place in Country Music's higher echelons is deserved. His hard stripped-down beat group Bakersfield sound is timeless. This dates from after the time he met Yoakam and was coaxed back onto the stage and the joy he has in his music is obvious which makes the DVD version of this release so worthwhile. Again the picture and sound quality, as we have come to expect, are excellent.

Jason Isbell ***Sirens Of The Ditch*** New West

The solo debut from the former Drive By Trucker's guitarist, features many of his former band mates and some of their sound but also moves into other areas as well. The album opens with *Brand New Kind Of Actress* a strong slice of guitar-bolstered rock while next up *Down In Hole* is more down home with just the stripped down soulful sound of guitar, bass and Spooner Oldham's B3. That Truckers Southern rock sound is evident on *Try*, But keyboards are also a fundamental element on the album with piano (often played by Isbell) and B3 prominent. *Dress Blues* has some pedal steel guitar from John Neff to add texture. The relaxed but hurting *Hurricanes* and *Hand Grenades* again highlights Isbell's maturing voice. The stripped down dobro based sound on *In A Razor Town* shows another aspect to his music and another direction that could be explored on this worthwhile and rewarding solo debut.

Malcolm Holcombe ***Not Forgotten*** Munich

Holcombe comes from the school of gravel-filled dirt-track gritty voices that are personal and pained and would certainly not pass muster with the Simon Cowell's of the world but are worth a multitude of note-perfect plastic perfection. Holcombe's blues are shared with a set of sympathetic players who give depth, texture and resolution to Holcombe's songs. I was immediately taken with this album having only heard snippets of his music in the past. The 12 songs featured here are cut from a similar rough cloth but all are full of real life pain and expectation. Mention should be made of Jared Tyler's bottle-neck guitar, Lap steel and dobro playing which colours each song with some earthy or ethereal sounds. Though the other players involved contributed equally to the overall edginess of the album and it overall raw but righteous feel. This album will not trouble the charts but may well find a place in your heart.

Kinky Friedman ***Live from Texas*** New West

I've seen Kinky's show here in Ireland several times and though much of it remains the same through the years Friedman manages to invest the material with his self-centered humour. This show as recorded for the Austin City Limits show in 1975 but was never broadcast. There are fourteen songs featured, many Kinky classics, including *Wild Man From Borneo*, *Asshole from El Paso*, *Ride 'Em Jewboy* and *They Ain't Making Jews Like Jesus Anymore*. Though recorded with a full band the songs on CD sound somehow a little under-whelming, however the DVD version has the visual aspect which adds another dimension. I'd have to say I prefer the later live version that Kinky put out or the versions that have appeared on a couple of tribute albums. Friedman is a better than he is often given credit for and a whole lot of fun overall, including the series of book he has written, but this outing doesn't quite do it for me.

Chuck Prophet ***Soap and Water*** Cooking Vinyl

The latest Prophet solo outing moves further away from the roots sound of his early work or indeed the contributions he made to the recent Green and Red reformation but still maintains the high standard he has set in recent times, though on the song *Would You Love Me* the guitar tone has a familiar twang. Over time Prophet has developed his writing and singing skills alongside his already honed instrumental skills. He is still not afraid to explore whatever sounds he feels the songs require and so on a song like *Doubter Out Of Jesus (All Over You)* he utilises voice distortion as well as drum machine rhythms to get a sense of disorientation across. The funky guitar that opens Small

Town contrast with the deadpan vocal and contrasting female vocal which sit over a simple keyboard motif all of which work to give another element to a varied and thoughtful album that if you have followed the pattern of his solo career makes a logical and progressive step that shows that it's maker has set himself no limits. The acoustic guitar intro on the closing track leads to a tale of migration and movement that is somewhat curiously entitled *Happy Ending*. And it is for this fully-realised Prophet and Brad Jones co-produced gem.

Jerry Lee Lewis ***Live From Texas*** New West

These CD and DVD releases from the Austin City Limits tend to be showcases for new album releases of for a selection of classic songs from a well established artist. This set Lewis includes many of his most famous tracks including, inevitably, a short *Great Balls Of Fire* and an five minute plus *Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On*. But what Jerry Lee Lewis audience would not want to hear them? This performance from 1983 finds hip in fine voice and spirit and his lively and visual energy is captured on the DVD version. His five piece band gives him the kind of backing required and many are Lewis veterans making for a satisfying and vibrant set which may not have the ballistic fireball effect of some of his earlier, wilder shows but it's one that Lewis fans will be happy to have.

Steven Mark ***Racing Grey*** Basset Records

If you like melodic, well played and sung songs that Racing Grey is an album you should check out. There are echoes of many classic acts such as The Beatles and a lot of US West Coast harmony groups of the 60's. The writing is strong, the opening Abington Square a perfect example of the thoughtful and lyrical. The songs is set in New York, where Mark lives. Other songs deal with such topics as celebrity pop culture (*Paris Hilton Generation*) and organised religion (*Gods On High*). But as a whole the album works as a unit, a set of songs that hang together. The band is a simple unit of bass, drum, guitars and piano with occasional keyboards and strings but it is a relatively simple approach that enhances the material but it is solidly structured and with a sense of underplayed hooks that catch in the head with frequent playing. The one cover is a version of the Burt Bacharach and Hal David song *Always Something There To Remind Me* which is done as a more wistful and laid back touch but works well in the overall context, giving the listener a familiar song to get into while acclimatising to his own songs. Not exactly a country/alt.country album, but it is one which will appeal to a similar audience who like their music to be engaging and on the right side of the pop divide. www.stevenmarkmusic.com

Lisa O'Kane ***It Don't Hurt*** New Light

This is the most accomplished album that Lisa O'Kane has released to date. Produced with regular partner Edward Tree it finds O'Kane in excellent vocal form and delivering a sound that is reminiscent of the late-eighties performers like Kathy Mattea. There are a selection of strong players involved including on the open O'Kane/Fosson song *Ain't Done Nothin'* the tell-tale licks of Albert Lee. Two regular West Coast players Taras Prodanuk and Skip Edwards are also involved as is producer Tree on guitars, among other instruments and other fine players. There is a mix of material from Lisa herself in a number of co-writes, often with Mark Fosson and outside songs – the best known of which is a acoustic version of John Prine's *Speed Of The Sound Of Loneliness*. One of the best is the restrained take of Keith Sewell and Kenny Edwards' *Misery And Happiness*. The songs take a realistic view on life, love and its twist and turns and O'Kane delivers them in a voice that is convincing. It may not be hardcore honky-tonk but never-the-less manages to have an edge that makes it eminently listenable and enjoyable as it straddles a folk/country basis. www.lisaokane.com

Jim Lauderdale ***The Bluegrass Diaries*** Yep Roc

Jim's is back in full bluegrass mode and each time he does he is more convincing. His voice has got stronger with time and he has proved himself an master of the art of songwriting who's songs can easily fit whichever category he delivers them in. This new set of songs are as good as any of his previous work. Unfortunately this disc comes without writer and musician credits so I can only tell that the playing is top-notch and solidly bluegrass. Lauderdale time as a writer of hits for the likes of George Strait may have passed but his songs are as distinctive as they always were and his melodies have something that makes them definably his own. A song like *Looking For A Good Place To Land* is a high-speed confection that could easily become a bluegrass classic. While *Chances* is equally alluring and inspirational. Some prefer his country

(super hits) direction but many are happy with either aspect of his work, which just keeps getting better. Jim Lauderdale is a man with a big heart and his music is never less than heartfelt. This is a man who enjoys his craft and we would do well to follow suit.

Perry Keyes ***The Last Ghost Train Home*** Laughing Outlaw

Any album that comes with a Jon Langford cover is at least worth a listen. It means the artist has some taste. Australian Perry Keyes album opens with some Rickenbacker before blooming into a full-blooded band outing. The names of Elvis Costello and Bruce Springsteen have been invoked but I'd suggest that Graham Parker and the Rumour may be another name to throw into the ring. The album is full of characters and locations from Keyes' home. Locations he grew up with, characters he admired or who had made an impression. These are delivered in a soulful strong voice by Keyes. His band is well able to convey the depths and directions his songs take. Not all the subjects of his songs are antipodean, *Joe Strummer* is an tribute to a man he admired as indeed are others which have such people as John Sattler, Ruben Tracy, Peter Cottonball and Dale Guggins are just some of the people that ride the ghost train of the dead and living that passes through Keyes mind station. Anyone who enjoys full-bodied, full throated, full-on keyboard layered rootish rock should seek this album out. They will be as rewarded for getting to know this album, as I was.

Duncan Earl Walters ***Guardian*** Spent Round

This is the second album from Walters, a baritone-voiced singer from the Austin based singer. He mixes honky-tonk with Tex-Mex and occasional folk overtones to produce a very pleasing album that highlights Walters songs and some top-notch playing from fellow Austinites including Tommy Spurlock on steel, Bobby Flores on fiddle and Flaco Jimenez on accordion. *Guardian Of The Skies* is a meditative song on the age old question of who is to blame for the many wrongs that exist in the world, both in the wider and the personal context. The uptempo *Greyhound* benefits from Jimenez's input. Things take a more edgy turn on the twangy driving *Crystal White Girl*. Overall the album sound not unlike the albums that Pinto Bennett made with his band. Nothing here is pushing the envelope, but is very solid and rewarding. Mature, reflective and revealing country music made with by someone who loves the music for its own sake.

Diana Jones ***My Remembrance Of You*** New Song

Another new name to me but one who has made a strong album that places in the same arena as the strong group of women making music that mixes acoustic country and bluegrass to telling effect. All eleven songs are written by Jones who also co-produced the album with Mark Thayer. She has a distinctive voice that at times reminds a little of Gillian Welch but maybe more forceful. It also features a strong cast of players not least in Duke Levine who worked with Mary Chapin Carpenter in the past. Her song tell tales of faith, loss and passion. There is a sense of trust in *All My Money On You*, however misplaced. The song *Pony* takes the position of a woman living under hard conditions on a reservation. The songs take this sense of quite observation rather than the big stories giving them an intimacy that is matched by the music, Diana Jones is a name to add to your list of a growing number of fine singer/songwriters adding their voice to the female perspective in alt.country music.

Stephen Simmons ***Something In Between*** Me and My Americana

The Last Call, Simmons' last album was a re-issue of his debut release following the well received *Drink Ring Jesus* that was an album essentially of Simmons' voice and guitar. This album like *Last Call* features a full band and is produced by Richard McLaurin with a fuller but less twangy sound, McLaurin also play the guitars and keyboards alongside additional players like Tammy Rogers and Al Perkins. The songs that immediately make an impression are *We'll See*, a song of a tentative relationship and *Down Tonight* a more hopeful but still incomplete relationship. It has a strong chorus and a hooky guitar line. Another song that makes its presence felt is the self-explanatory *Blues On A Sunny Day*. *Something In Between* again marks Simmons as a man honing his craft and making his mark in Americana with this album that grows with repeated listening.

Bettye La Vette ***The Scene Of The Crime*** Anti

A blistering mix of anguished Soul and greasy rock 'n' roll it says on the cover and while that covers it, it doesn't do justice to La Vette impassioned and forceful vocals. She gives the soul of her music a grittier and angrier edge that is matched by players who rise to the occasion. Players like Spooner Oldham, David Hood all add to texture.

These veteran Memphis players mix it with members of the Drive-By Truckers alongside some subtle steel from John Neff to deliver an album that fits the Anti ethos and while being capable of crossing boundaries. As an example her take on Billy Yates and Mike Curtis' *Choices* – previously recorded by George Jones – is restrained but obviously filled with truth. She makes no doubt her will has taken her through her life. Produced by La Vette along side the Truckers Patterson Hood and producer David Barbe it never overplays its hand as so much of what is classed as soul tend to do. The songs are well chosen including songs from Willie Nelson, Frankie Miller and John Hiatt alongside songs co-written by hood for the album. Those who like finely crafted and delivered music that really does have soul would do well to view the scene of the crime at an earliest opportunity.

Felicity Urquhart ***My Life*** Shock

Released last year in Australia the latest release from Felicity Urquhart is a much more diverse album than her last album, released under her first name only, which was a more solidly western swing orientated affair of, mostly, covers. This time out she has a hand 11 of the songs, either written solo or with Randy Scruggs or producer Glen Hannah. The often have an solid acoustic backing that allow focus on Urquhart's strong voice. The focus is solidly female, quite naturally, and that's where her appeal will doubtless lie. The playing is always never less than top notch. That I didn't connect with the album as I expected is just down to personal taste as songs like *Breathe, Mr Catfish* or the more solidly country *No Mistakes* and *That Boy Can Sure Jump A Train* make an impression, as well as underlining Urquhart's talents. This album is easily as good as many that are released by the major labels in Nashville these days and no doubt she will go on to produce some excellent work in the future based on her track record to date.

The Psychedelic Cowboys ***Jangle*** Waltz Taxis

An album that certainly reflects the bands name, this semi-concept album is great fun and is also damn fine cosmic American music. Led by John Harlan the album features a host of guests including veteran players Chris Darrow and Chris Hillman as well as newer "cosmic sons" such as Mike Stinson and James Intveld. The album features sound bites and spoken word during and between some tracks and the range of sounds runs from straight country to brass arrangements that underpin such songs as *Hey Uncle Sam*. The strong harmonies throughout the songs which soon tell their story with skill and humour as evidence in the spoken intro in *Viva Fresh Incident* which leads into the song *It's So Hard Gene*, about Gene Autry's cowboy code of honor. The album, in some ways, could have have come out of San Francisco in the late '60s it has that kind of loose organic sound that is fairly unique in this day and age but one that sound fresher because of it. Another highlight is their version of Bryan Mclean's Love classic *Alone Again Or*. I thoroughly enjoyed this album and there should be more like it. Some of the tracks stretch out, the final track *Time Between Sixth and Drexel* or *Ithream Gets The Last Laugh* stretching to over eight minutes. But it's never less than entertaining and well worth seeking out. www.taxis.com

Martin Stephenson And The Daintees ***Boat To Bolivia*** Kitchenware

Proof that the old adage is wrong - being good does not mean that you will rise to the top. Martin Stephenson has been consistently good throughout his career. A perceptive and emotive writer as well as a distinctive and warm singer he has, throughout his career, produced music that deserves a wider audience. This new compilation is deceptive, packaged as a part of Kitchenware's 25 anniversary releases, *Boat To Bolivia* it is, in truth, more of a career overview and it's a pity that there isn't more track source information included. But that shouldn't detract from a striking body of work that runs through a wide range of styles from the instrumental blues of *Tribute to the Late Reverend Gary Davis* through the country of *Candle In The Middle* to such Stephenson classics as *Crocodile Cryer*, *Wholly Humble Heart* and the reggae-styled title track. It's all good and if you missed it the first time out then do yourself a favour and check this two CD set out.

John Train ***Mesopotamia Blues*** Chapter 7

The new album from the roots rock band, who's mainman is singer/writer John Houlan, is one that takes another pointed pop at American policy. They do this with a set of original Houlan songs and some songs that reflect on earlier times but which seem to say that the world really hasn't learned from past experience. The middle

depth overall. It gives musicians like Greg Leisz the chance to play several different string instruments that add to the texture as does Patrick Warren's keyboards. Mary's vocal sound more considered but still have a natural quality that allows her limited range to be as expressive as it always has been. There are a number of co-writes here one, the opening *Snakebit*, with Hayes Carll. Fred Eaglesmith co-wrote the title track but the songs that immediately hit home are solo songs like *Last Of The Hobo Kings* and *Please* which deals with the separation that all travelling musicians have to face in order to do what they do. Again this is another much anticipated release from Mary Gauthier who has always written the hard songs of the human condition but with insight and, sometimes humour. Joe Henry has brought an ambience into play that will make this an album to listen to over a period of time and still hear something you may not have heard before, which can only be a good thing.

Hayseed Dixie **No Covers** Cooking Vinyl

That they have been criticised, in some quarters, as something of a one joke band - bluegrass band cover metal favourites – doesn't allow for the fact that the repertoire of many bluegrass bands is traditional songs and classic covers Hayseed Dixie just chose a different source. There should be no denying the skill and ability of the players involved. Now in a move that will either open a whole new direction for them or will estrange them from those who love the covers and who have never listened to another bluegrass band, they have recorded an album of original songs. That's not the only radical change either as they have now also added drums to the mix. This only adds to the overall drive and raucous humour that underlines some of their material. Most of the songs and the percussion are the work of John Wheeler aka Barley Scotch, the amiable front man of Hayseed Dixie who also produced and recorded the album. The songs range from the more serious *Born To Die In France* to the ladishness of *Bouncing Betty Boogie* or the tongue-in-cheek *Donkeys In Morocco*. Those who have loved the band in the past should have no trouble in adapting to the new material source, while those who always saw them as a joke are unlikely to see the light, for make no mistake, there is a lot of talent and ambition involved in this band.

Nick Lowe **Jesus Of Cool** Proper

I was once told that much of what passes for Americana could be found in the music of Rockpile who's two main men were Dave Edmunds and Nick Lowe. Lowe's previous band were Brinsley Schwarz, a band who were no strangers to country. Some of Lowe's later work has also travelled down a country road but his solo debut which was released in the UK as *Jesus Of Cool* and *Pure Pop For Now People* was more of a concisely realised summation of rock at the dawn of punk. In retrospect the stripped down arrangements are not dissimilar to much of what now falls under the roots rock heading. Listen to *Tonight, Cruel to Be Kind* or *They Call It Rock*. While some of the songs may not have worn as well as others the stand-out tracks still hit home on this extended and elaborately packaged re-release. I loved the album then and find much to enjoy here, as there is with most of Lowe's solo albums.

Merle Haggard **From The King To The Barrooms** HumpHead

A very useful compilation of Merle's MCA days, often overlooked in comparison to his days at Capitol. And while these tracks don't scale the heights that the best of those records reached there are some fine moments here. The King in the title refers to a selection of tracks from a tribute album the Hag released shortly after Elvis Presley's death. These include *Love Me Tender*, *Don't Be Cruel* and *That's All Right (Mama)*. Though heartfelt some of these feel a little to reverential and safe. The real gems here are such tracks as *Ramblin' Fever*, *Leonard* and *Back To The Barrooms Again*. These 24 tracks recorded between 1977 and 1981 find Haggard in good voice and the albums released during this period yielded 11 top ten hits. For Haggard fans, new and old, this album will be a welcome addition to their collection and a testament to the continuing legend of one of country music's greatest voices.

Billy Currington **Doin' Somethin' Right**/Billy Currington HumpHead

A part of HumpHead two CD album packages that sell for a budget price that bring albums out that may not previously been easily available in the domestic market. Currington is a new name to me. I know he's been successful in the States and falls into the country hunk category. He delivers a mix of chugging uptempo songs like *I Wanna Be A Hillbilly* to ballads like *Must Be Doin' Somethin' Right*. He includes a version of *Lucille* that is a fair rerun of the better known Kenny Rogers' version. Currington co-writes some of the songs on the two albums, mostly with producer Carson Chamberlain

(and others). While I can't claim anything here really moves me it is straight down the middle radio friendly country which should find it's share of fans over here too.

Terri Clark **The Ultimate Collection** HumpHead

When she appeared Clark appeared a sassy new voice with traditional leanings. This album shows that she can deliver in many categories from mainstream to the more edgy material. It's interesting that the cover shows a less "country" image compared to the cowboy hated and booted picture in the booklet. That she worked with Alan Jackson producer Keith Stegall helped. Though many of the songs here were hits few made the coveted number one slot. The two songs here to do that were *You're Easy On The Eyes* and *Girls Lie Too*. Both of which move closer to the radio friendly mainstream. Also here is here fine version of Warren Zevon's *Poor, Poor Pitiful Me*. Also less mainstream is the songs from the Stuart Smith produced album *Fearless* which included here co-write with Mary-Chapin Carpenter *No Fear*. That album also included a strong song from Dean Miller and Tammy Rogers entitled *A Little Gasoline*. While she may not be as hardcore as an artist like Elizabeth Cook she did pave the way for fellow artists like Gretchen Wilson as this strong collection illustrates.

Vince Gill **Next Big Thing/Let's Make Sure We Kiss Goodbye** HumpHead

I kinda lost track of Gill when his albums became unavailable over here. For my money his very country album *The Key* is his finest. None-the-less he is a consummate artist. A top-notch singer, guitar player, writer and producer. He produced *Next Big Thing* while *Let's Make Sure We Kiss Goodbye* was produced by long-time producer Tony Brown. As his recent 4 CD box set shows Gill is comfortable delivering his music in numerous styles. The songs range from such gems as the uptempo *Don't Let Her Get Away*, co-written with Al Anderson with its naggingly familiar riff to the heartbreak ballads like *These Broken Hearts* or his understanding of the position he had reached, as an artist, in the youth driven Music Row with *Young Man's Town*. The song *Old Time Fiddle* pays respect to the music's roots. The second CD *Let's Make Sure We Kiss Goodbye* was recorded in the wake of his divorce from Janice Gill. It, co-incidentally, includes a duet with future wife Amy Grant. The album explores relationships and how they change and shift under such stress. And while not my favourite of his albums still has its strengths. Vince Gill has always been a artist deserving of attention and this double pack is well worth revisiting as an example of this craftsman's work.

Demolition String Band **Different Kinds Of Love** Breaking Records

The band's fourth album is a good example of their mix of acoustic based bluegrass-tinged and roots rock. Centered around the voice and writing of Elena Skye voice and Boo Reiner's guitar prowess. Underpinning this is the solid rhythm section of Phil Cimina and Winston Raye. The themes are pure country - broken relationships, loneliness and drinking. But it's all delivered with a drive and vibrancy that is both infectious and instructive. The New Jersey band has been acclaimed for it's previous albums but this time out they may have put together their best album yet. Produced by Reiners and Skye, it was recorded, in the main, at Southern Culture On The Skids' Rick Miller's Kudzu Ranch. It is a perfect example of the kind of dynamic music that exists slightly under the radar, but that should garner more attention. *Different Kinds Of Love* is an entertaining and enjoyable album, one that reveals more with playing and highlights a band doing their music exactly as they want to. www.breakingrecordsmusic.com

Drive-By Truckers **Brighter Than Creation's Dark** New West

I have never been a particular fan of southern rock but enjoyed (to a degree) *Southern Rock Opera*, my first encounter with Drive-By Truckers. The band have recently gone through some changes with the departure of guitarist/singer-songwriter Jason Isbell and pedal steel guitarist John Neff, who previously guested with the band now joins as a full time member. It is again produced by long-time associate David Barbe and to these ears may be one of the best things they have done. It is a long album with 19 songs and a 70 minute plus running time, But the use of different writers and singers gives enough variety to satisfy. Like bassist Shonna Tuckers' vocal contributions on songs like *I'm Sorry Huston* give another perspective. Then there are songs like *Two Daughters And A Beautiful Wife* which opens with a banjo and is underpinned by Neff's pedal steel or the more frantic and signature songs like *3 Dimes Down*, with distorted guitars and harder vocal. The songs deal with an equally diverse set of subjects including Iraq, right back to small town southern lifestyles. Patterson Hood leads the band through these changes and comes out in front with an album that doesn't outstay it's welcome and one that may well be a good point to get to know this inventive outfit.

Owen Temple **Two Thousand Miles** El Paisano

Fitting into the contemporary tradition of Texas singer/songwriters Owen Temple has returned to recording after the distributor of his last album went awol. Again produced by Lloyd Maines it highlights Temple's thematic songs, full of ordinary people and some not so ordinary. Temple may not have the most distinctive of voices but it more than meets the demands of his songs. It has warmth and is real. It is front and centre over a set of songs that are delivered in style by a set of musicians who are top notch, including producer Maines, guitarist David Grissom, drummer Dave Sanger and bassist Glenn Fukunaga. If you like your Texas music rough, real and ready then this is an album to enjoy. The songs deal with rodeo's rough life in *Swear It Off Again* to an aspiring singer who can't quite get up the nerve to sing in the self-explanatory *Can't Drink Enough To Sing*. To wholehearted love songs like *I Just Can't Quit Loving You* or the reverse side of the coin in *Like We Still Care*. I've grown to like this album a lot with playing, and I know there's a lot of people out there who would feel the same. www.owentemple.com

Randy Thompson **Further On** Jackpot

The last album release, *It's Not Me*, was one that I returned several times since its release, especially for its striking title track, a song about denial and isolation. This new album is another strong contender. Thompson's hard-working, hard-edged music is never going to make big waves in the mainstream. It is music that is informed by traditional country, as well as by rock and blues. This spread of inspiration is underlined by the presence here of original Drifting Cowboy Don Helms, as well as Thompson's (then) 15 year old son on blues slide guitar. The rest of the players are equally good. The lyrics for the title track were written by his grandfather and he does them justice. There are other covers too, *Rocksalt And Nails* was written by Utah Phillips and there's also Steve Gillette and Linda Albertano's *Molly and Tenderhooks*. He updates two traditional songs *Ol'97* and *Goin' Down To Lynchburg Town*, both are given full-on, hard-driving treatments. While nothing hits home here with quite as much raw power as *It's Not Me*, it is a very rewarding and righteous recording. Randy Thompson is making the best music he can, it's real and it's well worth seeking out. www.randythompson.net

Ricky Warwick **Loves Owes EP** Trust Few

A largely acoustic set of songs from Ricky Warwick, now based in LA, Ricky splits his time between more metallic music-based projects and the roots rock of his solo albums. These new songs are often stripped down to just voice and guitar but show his writing and vocal strengths. The one exception is *Ghost Town Road* which features a full electric and bodes well for his next album. It continues the direction of his two previous albums but show a growing maturity and confidence in the vocal and writing.

Brendan Glennon **The Final Bell** Quill Lane

Home grown singer/songwriter delivers a set of well produced songs that feature some gentle but effective playing from producer Pat O'Donnell, alongside Jimmy Kelly on banjo and Niall Lawlor on slide and guitar, amongst others. It is a mix of folk and acoustic country styled songs. Mostly reflective songs of love, life and loss. Glennon has a soft understated voice that on occasion could benefit with a little more grit but overall will appeal to those who either see him in performance or who like their music to take them to a quieter, gentler place. Aside from Glennon's own songs written with co-writers such as Vincent Caprani and Christy Byrne like the title track there are those that include Niall Lawlor's *Keys To The Kingdom* and *Look No Tears* written by Jimmy Kelly. Overall this album sounds as good as many a more established artist and bigger label release.

Sammy Kershaw **The Ultimate Collection** Humphead

I'm in two minds about Mr. Kershaw. He possess a strong voice but, as this collection shows, he has swung between the country and the cosmopolitan. There are love ballads, duets with ex-wife Lorrie Morgan and songs that are uptempo or more obviously country. The latter include *Honky Tonk America*, *Vidalia*. *Haunted Heart*, *If You're Gona Walk, I'm Going Crawl*, *Cadillac Style* (his breakthrough hit) or the country heartbreaker *Yard Sale*. Another highlight is his version of the Amazing Rhythm Aces' *Third Rate Romance*. But it is his prowess with ballads around which he applies his twangy tonsils that he will be most associated. There are many here and his country croon will, with this 22 track collection, find him picking up new fans, who haven't been readily acquainted with Kershaw in the past, but will find his smooth style well to their liking.

eastern tones that open *Equipment Failure* given expression to the current conflict while the John Stewart song Draft Age comes from an earlier but equally turbulent era. The title track is based on the words of Rudyard Kipling. Terry Allen's Yo Ho Ho and Butch Hancock's Already Gone cover similar themes. The latter is a highlight and Houlan delivers the song in a tone not unlike Hancock on the linear tale of self-destruction. Though Look Her In The Eye is a Houlan song that the looks closer to home. Produced by Mike "slo-mo" Brenner, who also plays on the album including some effective pedal steel on Already Gone (a song that covers a range of injustices, including Native American displacement) it has its heart and mind in a place that needs discussion and debate and add this album to a growing stack of artists that include Neil Young and Steve Earle who sing of issues but make some good albums while doing so.

Steve Earle ***Washington Square Serenade*** New West
Goodbye Guitar Town sings Steve Earle who has now settled with wife Alison Moorer in New York. The album makes no huge departure from his previous work other than in the way he recorded it and the detail of its production. The structure is simpler structured around his voice and instruments rather than around a band setting. Producer John King then adds subtle rhythms and hip-hop elements and loops behind the acoustic instruments to given the overall sound a new twist. The themes are straight love songs, songs of place and songs of people. They mirror the changes in his life and the times he lives in. That the country and the city he now lives in were built on the influx of immigrants is cover in the song *City Of Immigrants* and elsewhere, *Satellite Radio* is a song that uses words and beats that are about his stint as a dj on that medium. Earle voice by know has become its own individual instrument, readily identifiable but here is given more scope as the instrumentation, even with a full band, is lighter giving him more room to express the words on what is a more internally focused work that on recent albums. It's one that fans will enjoy and savour. There is a deluxe version that includes a DVD that expands on the themes and features some elements of the recording session and three complete songs that add to the overall package in more ways that one.

Stagger Lee ***Bad Shoes*** Split Lip
A two track, one video calling card from the Dublin two boy, two girls band who have a hard rockin' edge but shine on the less frantic song *Misery River*. The music suggests many comparisons but it's early stages is promising enough to make you look forward to the full length feature.

Various Artists ***Hillbilly Bop and Boogie/Swingbillies*** Ace
Two entertaining collections from the King vaults that feature a bunch of artists some obscure names along side more well know artists like Grandpa Jones, The Delmore Brothers, Moon Mullican and Hardrock Gunter on the former and while the Swingbillies set may feature less well know names it is the more essential of the two with the excellent Jimmie Dolan on several cuts. Both though will delight those who love listening to music created in the late 40s and early 50s. The mastering by Nick Robbins bring the best out of these old grooves and shows that the roots of rock and roll as well as country music have many and varied sources. The themes may seem quaint in this day and age but they raise a smile as well as get the foot tapping. How many acts of today will be worth such revision in years to come? Well, quite a few I'd image but I'd also suspect that the real gems, as here, are the ones that existed outside the mainstream.

Dwight Yoakam ***Dwight Sings Buck*** New West
Both Yoakam and Buck Owens were to play the inaugural Midlands Festival, it would have been very special but Owens died before that could happen. As a tribute to his friend and mentor Yoakam played a selection of heartfelt songs to Owens memory at the festival, Now comes this telling tribute of 15 songs associated with Owens, but unlike the recent Derailers similar tribute where they stick so close to the Owens sound that many have found it pointless, Yoakam makes these songs his own, giving them perhaps his best vocal performance yet. And as Yoakam is perhaps the best country singer of his generation then you know this is something special. He knows these songs inside out and therefore allows himself to get to their core. It is an album that, while never letting you lose sight of the songs origins, doesn't just make you want to return to the originals. Sure there will be debate as to whether a particular version is

bettered by someone else's version or the Buck original but that doesn't take away from this as a vibrant, dynamic and enjoyable set in its own right. Produced by Yoakam it sounds exactly as he wanted it to. Making this is an album that makes perfect sense on every level and a must for fans of either artist or just simply perfectly realised country music.

Moot Davis ***Already Moved On*** Little Dog
Proving that former Dwight Yoakam producer and guitarist hasn't lost his touch is this second release on Little Dog for Moot Davis, a solid singer and writer who may not be as stylistic individual as Yoakam but never-the-less delivers the goods. Davis' tight band also includes Tim Hasler and Mark Thomas on drums and bass as well as Boo Bernstein on pedal steel and Don Reed on fiddle. The songs, mostly written by Davis and Anderson are short vignettes of love -lost and sought – but hit the right tone with such memorable songs as *The Man, The Myth* and the title track, where Moot voice is tinged with pain and regret. Both necessary ingredients in a good country song. They also handle the moodier material like *Way Down Town* with skill giving the album greater depth and resonance. The album closer, with Brennen Leigh on background vocals is a cover of *I'm The Only Hell (My Mama Ever Raised)*, and it ends the CD on a devil-may-care kick-ass note that's fitting for this fine album.

Various Artists ***The Music Of The Wild West*** Varese Sarabande
A journey through the varied and multi-cultural music of a particular time and period that was the soundtrack to the 1993 television mini-series The Wild West. Produced by Nitty Gritty alumni John McEuen it features 45 songs that cover many different sources and singers from old-times string bands to brass bands as well as native American chants. The vocals range from cowboy singers Red Steagall and Don Edwards through Crystal Gayle, Michael Martin Murphy and Lyle Lovett (doing a voice over). The themes are, naturally, about the toils and tribulations of living and travelling through the wild west but overall the album manages to tell a story in song and music that will capture the imagination of any who has an interest in that era. It's rerelease now should make it easier to find and enjoy.

Prison Love ***A Night In The Box*** Self-Release
The band are getting better all the time and this their latest is the most fully realised and well recorded release to date. Their music is much less bluegrass than they were tagged when they first appeared and is more Cajun and old -time but none-the-less spirited and infectious as anyone who has caught their live shows would attest. The majority of their songs are either traditional of from solid sources as Dirk Powell and Dewey Balfa. Their strength is in the array of voices and the range of instruments they have on offer. All of which make them a strong contender on album, if not yet quite as captivating as they are in person, but definitely well worth listening to and ideal if you want your party to go with a swing. That they may need, in the long term, to develop their own writing skills. That will be important if they want to compete with the likes of The Old Crow Medicine Show. That depends on their overall ambition but for now you can do a lot worse then spend a night in the box.

Johnny Irion ***Ex Tempore*** RTE 8
For his latest solo album Johnny Irion has delivered an album rich in melody and musical textures. The opening Take Care for instance has pedal steel and flute while Short Lease has a soulful vocal chorus atop of the full sound that adds depth to the songs. The rhythm sections of *The Mattress* and *The Corner Pockets* appear alongside some guest vocalists including,, naturally, his wife Sarah Lee Guthrie. This is an album of crafted pop/rock music that need to be carefully listened to get the best out of its inner depths. Irion's high register voice is his signature while the songs offer a variety of options from the electric guitar riff driven Madrid to the soft focus acoustic and harmonica backed lullaby of *Brush Verteeth Blues* *56, 1000 Miles An Hour* again uses the pedal steel subtly to enhance the songs sense of wonder, while *Always Lookin Out* has a more fragmented finish. Irion makes music that has been compared to Neil Young and one can see why, but he never is less than his own man and this album has more than enough going for it to give his songs their chance to make their own mark.

Kane Welch Kaplan Dead Reckoning
The trio return with another set of stripped down songs that feature the vocals of Kieran Kane and Kevin Welch and the instrumental skills of Fats Kaplan. There is also

another component to this trio and that is the percussion of Lucas Kane. Those who have been fans of Kane and Welch over their recorded history may, at times, look forward to a full album from each but at the moment this intimate setting is how they are jointly presenting their songs. The songs alternate between each taking lead vocal or occasionally like on *Red Light Blinking* feature just Kieran Kane on vocal and banjo with Kaplan adding some tasteful steel. But for the most part it's the four of them delivering a sparse acoustic sound, though Fats plays simple electric guitar that adds an extra dimension to a lot of the songs. The songs though are not lacking in texture or depth because of the instrumentation, rather they deliver the raw essence of each one in a kind of folk/blues mode that benefits for the strong vocal presence and the focused writing. By the way the under the CD picture of Lucas Kane was taken in Whelans. May they return again soon.

UK States ***Psychogeography*** HitBack
A four piece band that seem to have recorded the album in London and Sydney it was produced by one of the bands two songwriters Christian Lewcock. The sound they make is a mix of acoustic guitars and voices overlaid with a instruments including harmonium, mandolin and lap-steel and dobro. Overall it's an attractive and warm album that features such song as *Jessie Found A Crow* – she nursed it back to health and *She Talks To Spiders* (she'd even talk to us). An album of simple, everyday themes and easy sounds that rewards playing. The UK States are on of those bands who sound like they are making music because they want to rather than simply to become celebrities. They are, for the most part positive, though on occasion touch on darker themes and tones as with *Surrounded By Darkness*. UK States are making understated but effective music that works more as a whole body of work rather than a series of individual tracks and should be listened to in that way.

The Charlie Sizmore Band ***Good News*** Rounder
Renowned bluegrass player Sizmore opens this album with *I've Fallen And I Can't Get Up* at a fast pace with some hot picking but the album also features some straight country songs that highlight his versatile singing. *The Hard Rock Bottom Of Your Heart*, previously best know as a Randy Travis recording is here given a banjo led version that perfectly suits the song and the singer. The rest of the album, while sticking to essentially bluegrass instrumentation mixes the two related sources with ease and humour. Listen to *Alison's Band* wherein Sizmore expresses the wish to play with Union Station. Equally *Blame It On Vern* lays his drinking problems on listening to Vern Gosdin. A nice variation on a classic heartbreak song that shows could easily deliver an album of similar classic material. An album to be enjoyed by those who enjoy one or both styles of music, especially when it's delivered with such overall panache.

The Hacienda Brothers ***Music For Ranch And Town*** Self Release
Recorded for a radio show in Oslo in October two years ago this (gig and website release) shows the band in fine form. They open with an extended version of *Railed* from the debut album, much of the set is taken from that self-titled release with a couple of songs that would later turn up on *What's Wrong With Right?* Those of you lucky enough to catch the band live will know what to expect. Obviously the sound is live, but it has character and it has energy. The band are a solid unit, allowing Dave Gonzalez guitar and Chris Gaffney's voice to take centre stage but David Berzansky's is also crucial to the overall sound. Hank Maninger and Dale Daniel are also vital in the rhythm section. The songs unique to this set include a twelve minute plus version of *Since I Met You Baby* which allows Gaffney to use his accordion on this soulful slow-paced ballad. They follow that with *Home Of The Blues* sung by Gonzalez and Maninger, and it's a delight. As is the twang-filled Johnny Paycheck ,Audrey Mayhew co-write *If I'm Gonna Sink*. Gonzalez and Berzansky also have fun with the instrumental *Brotherized*. Then after the extended soul of *Cowboys To Girls* they finish with another Gonzalez original *Gone*. Fans of the band will welcome this with open arms and those who would like to hear some high class honky-tonk in its natural home should investigate this fine record.

Mary Gauthier ***Between Daylight And Dark*** Lost Highway
For this album Gauthier has chosen Joe Henry as a producer and there are some changes to the sound. Built around Gauthier voice and striking songs there is another layer to the music that allows the instruments to move around in the shadows and light giving them a different focus than before. All of which gives the album some added

Allison Moorer ***The Ultimate Collection*** Humphead

Another in Humphead's worthwhile overview UK collections of the career of artists who may not have made the impact they should have in the past. The 18 tracks featured come from 5 albums she released on Universal imprints. This collection highlights her more country side, her expressive and powerful voice as well as her songwriting skills, most often with then husband Doyle Primm. There is much to recommend this collection and those nor really aware of Allison Moorer's immense talent should pick this up. *Soft Place To Fall*, *The One That Got Away (Got Away With My Heart)*, co-written with Kostas through to the final "hidden" but listed track *Cold Cold Earth*, a song full of raw emotion and sad regret, which may have been too much for Music Row sensibilities. Moorer's sister Shelby Lynne guests on the one selection from her live album *Show* and makes this a must have for anyone who has not been a fan since day one.

Marty Stuart ***Whiskey And Rhinestones*** Humphead

This collection from his long association with Universal highlights that, along with Dwight Yoakam, Marty Stuart has kept the flame and tradition of country music alive and kicking. This album is full of highlights and career highpoints. It also showcases the wide range of music, loosely under the overall umbrella of country that Stuart has produced through the years. There are songs that include honky-tonk, rockabilly, country soul, bluegrass as well as hard-knock ballads. The latter exemplified by his duet with one-time touring partner Travis Tritt on *This One's Going To Hurt You (For A Long Long Time)*. Throughout there is expressive singing, memorable songs and superlative playing. Long time fans will doubtless have everything here but those not so well acquainted with the work of Marty Stuart would do well to invest in this varied and thoroughly enjoyable collection.

Willie Nelson ***Moments Of Forever*** Lost Highway

The latest in an ongoing career that sees Nelson working with some seemingly unlikely producers. This time Nelson is produced by Kenny Chesney and veteran producer Buddy Cannon and it is actually better than some reviews have suggested. There seems to be a view that Willie Nelson sleep walks through these albums but I tend to think different and as I case in point his guitar playing is integral to the album. This suggests a lot more involvement that just simply arriving in the studio to just add his vocals to finished tracks. His take on Kris Kristofferson's *Moments Of Forever* is undeniably strong. And while he may not express the anger of Randy Newman in his take of *Louisiana* I hear a deep sense of regret in Nelson's voice that may be a more subjective response, and as the song was written in 1974 it had nothing to do with the recent disaster but more reflects the sadness that it could happen again. Granted his version of Dylan's *Gotta Serve Somebody* is not among his best but elsewhere his vocal on *Keep Me From Blowing Away* is strong as ever and there is a sense of humour on *Worry B Gone* and wry observation on *You Don't Think I'm Funny Anymore*. That Nelson is recording regularly is a positive thing and more power to him that he is experimenting with different producers and players. Willie Nelson is a genuine legend and his music still has warmth, soul and sincerity and that should be more than a moment of forever.

C. R. Avery ***Magic Hour Sailor Songs*** Bongo Beat

The press release loosely describes this as "a hip hop, beatbox, blues, harmonica, spoken word, Americana album. Which I suppose just about covers it. It is a powerful listening experience that mixes the rhythm of the words with the rhythm of life along with some percussive rhythms. The open track is a word play while *New Stanzas For Amazing Grace* features Avery singing over a plucked banjo and beat backing. Each track sets up a different story except *Ring A Bell*, which is a 10 second track that lives up to its title. The closing track *The Ballad Of Charlie Parker and Patsy Cline* features Avery's gravely voice over over minimal but effective backing telling how the jazz legend used to listen to the country singer. Avery is admired by Tom Waits and is original enough in his music to see why. Avery is not one of those Waits copyists but has created his own offbeat world of spoken word and a compelling musical soundtrack that makes *Magic Hour Sailor Songs* a riveting and rewarding recreation that repays repeated listening. www.cravery.com

Carlene Carter ***Stronger*** Yep Roc

That she has come through stronger after the loss and distress that has been a part of her life over the recent years is reflected in this her first album in quite some time. Musically *Stronger* touches on her family heritage as well as on the more uptempo and rockier side of her music. *To Change Your Heart* is built around a solid and alluring acoustic bedrock played for the most part by producer John McFee, who produced,

engineered, mixed and (for the most part) played the album. Carter's voice also mirrors the title sounding full of vigour and enthusiasm. Equally the songs are good all written by Carter who can feel proud of this album and that she is continuing the family line and making a link with the excellent albums she made earlier in her career. There may be too much here that smacks of real feeling for country radio to start playing Carlene Carter again as they once did there is more than enough for those of us who have been fans in the past. The way she can move from the rockin' guitar rideout of *I'm So Cool* to the inherent sadness of the pedal steel country song *Break My Little Heart In Two* shows that she is back at the top of her game. One can only hope that the troubles are now behind her and that she is indeed stronger as this album suggests.

Chatham County Line ***IV*** Yep Roc

The fourth album from the forward thinking bluegrass aligned quartet find them consolidating their acoustic based sound with such additional textures as pedal steel, viola and piano which may upset the purists but will delight those who have come to admire the bands progressive but not genre breaking sound. In other words like label mate Jim Lauderdale they take songs that could easily sit in a number of settings and give them a solid acoustic grounding that is bluegrass in base but is not restricted by narrow definitions of genre. The songs are written by various members of the band, with the bulk coming from the pen of main singer Dave Wilson. Production is again by Chris Stamey, one reason the sound is not stuck in a particular place and time. When the songs are as good as *The Carolinian*, wherein they use their strong harmonic vocal skills on a undoubted strong melody, they make their point well. This is an integrated quartet who have grown into the direction they have chosen to take the music of Chatham County Line. This is exemplified by a striking song like *Birmingham Jail* wherein the vocals mix with the strident playing to tell a tale of racist realism. *IV* is worthy of adding to any music collection.

Normally it is our policy to feature albums that are kindly sent in to Lonesome Highway for review. But that means that some times worthy albums miss out. Here are a few:

Teddy Thompson ***Upfront and Down Low*** Verve Forecast

The back of the label says "file under pop" but this is pure country and that it comes from an Englishman (son of Richard and Linda Thompson) recording on a jazz label says a lot about the state of country music in the mainstream. It is my album of the year. It may reinforce the stereotypical view of country music as miserable and downbeat, but that too miss the point that a shared sadness can have the opposite and uplifting effect on the listener. Yes, these songs are unrelentingly sad and filled with remorse and regret but they are also real and deal in truths. Not only that but Thompson sings with an understanding and passion that puts him up there with the best, The arrangements are uniformly excellent and the playing equally strong, as are the song choices. Along side the fine players Thompson is joined by Iris DeMent, Tift Merrit and Jenni Muldaur to add a female element to three of the songs. This is unreservedly recommended to anyone who likes countryopolitan sounds from the soul of classic country. "Who wants to listen to such sad songs", well I for one do.

The Salty Dogs ***Autoharpoon*** Big Bender

A new name to me but they make good, solid country music. It's got twang and traditional themes. The bulk of the songs are well written by singer Brad Williams who has a voice not dissimilar to a less nasally Dwight Yoakam. The band play with conviction and class. They also feature some guests including drummer D.J. Fontana. They appear to come from Little Rock in Arkansas, as that's where the album was recorded, and must be regional favourites and with this album deserve some greater exposure. Again nothing new happens here, no borders are crossed, rather fine music is made. The album also comes with a nice positive bit of praise from Jason Ringenberg who says that they are... "salt of the earth country". Too right, my friend. www.thesaltydogs.net

Jason Eady And The Wayward Apostles ***Wild Eyed Serenade*** Littoraria

The latest album from the Texas singer/songwriter and band is another strong contender. Eady has a good rich voice and the band add texture and sympathetic support to the largely self-written songs that range from acoustic to twang filled uptempo honky-tonk songs. The vocal support is also strong with several of the band and producer Steven Collins lending vocal support to Eady. His songs are strong with some stand outs in the accordion -lead *Redemption*, the jaunty fiddle-based *Before I Was Dead* and particularly *I Will* and the quiet regret of *Forgive Me*. A varied and rounded album of contemporary country music that covers a number of bases. www.jasoneady.com

With thanks to Miles of Music. www.milesofmusic.com

Welcome to the latest edition of our on going online expanded editions of Lonesome Highway. As per usual is has been written by Steve Rapid and edited by Sandy Harsch with original photography by Ronnie Norton. Ronnie also hosts the internet radio show Lonesome Highway - Bluegrass and Beyond on CMR Nashville at www.cmrnashville.net. Paul McGee contributed two fine interviews – thanks Paul. We would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of labels, promoters and artists who have help with this issue. They include Stevo Berube, Derek Nally, MCD, Raglane and POD concerts, David and Freddie at all at UMG Ireland, Fergus Denham at Yep Roc, Jo at Humphead, Geraint Jones, Kissy Black, Martha Moore, Little Dog Records and numerous others who have contacted us or sent over CDs for review. In that light thanks again to Corrie and Jeff at Miles of Music.

Some of you who attended the Midlands Festival may have seen myself and Ronnie introduce various acts. We hope that this year will also bring some exciting and rewarding live events.

Write to Lonesome Highway at Creative House, Little Fitzwilliam Place, Fitzwilliam Lane, Dublin 2, Ireland.

