**ONLINE ISSUE 6 - SUMMER 2009** LONESOME IN THIS ISSUE INTERVIEWS WITH: MICHAEL WESTON KING | DAVID OLNEY | SERGIO WEBB CHUCK MEAD | TIFT MERRITT | AMY LEVERE | BRAY VISTA WJ HUNT | TOM LEWIS



Welcome to Lonesome Highway's new issue. It's been fun meeting and talking to a number of people out there who are making some fine music, Something that's kind of summed up by Ronnie's picture, here, of Tift Merritt and Teddy Thompson. We would like to thank those artists who were kind enough to allow us to interview them in person, by phone or via e-mail.

Thanks also to those who have sent us CDs to review. These have included Jo at HumpHead, Stevo Burebe,Geraint Jones at G Music, Martha Moore and Fergus Deneham at Yep Roc amongst others. It would seem that the trend for magazines, such as our small endeavour, to go online is an ongoing part of the recession and shrinking of the print market. Long running magazine Country Standard Time is the latest to shed its physical skin. It is however still viewable with new reviews and more at www.countrystandardtime.com/countrymusic.asp where it is updated regularly as is the No Depression site www.nodepression.com both well worth a visit as is www.smartchoicemusic.com the UK based source of all things country on CD.

We would also like to thank those promoters who have allowed us access to gigs to conduct interviews and to review concerts. With a number of sources closing we are hoping that artists and labels will send CD's for review directly to Lonesome Highway - our focus is on hardcore country, alternative and Americana and albums fitting those categories will be welcomed and reviewed.

This issue was produced by Stephen Rapid, Ronnie Norton and Sandy Harsch.

Ronnie Norton's Lonesome Highway radio show **Bluegrass and Beyond** is on CMR Nashville on Friday 4pm, Saturday 2am and 8pm. it's at www.cmrnashville.net/presenters/ronnienorton.php

Sandy Harsch's **Country Time**, is on at 23:10 RTE Radio One and 88.5FM on Saturdays - it's also available online @rte/country time.

Write to us at: Lonesome Highway 4 Texas Lane Chalfont Malahide Co. Dublin Ireland



Edition two - corrected proof

"I'm gonna keep making albums until somebody buys them"

## SERGIO **R** DAVID WERR VOLNEY -

"Jump High, Fart Loud and... Fear Nothing"

Mark 'Sergio' Webb is a talented Texas born Nashville based guitarist who played with Pinto Bennett and The Famous Motel Cowboys, Gail Davies and currently partners David Olney for his live gigs. He also releases solo albums and occasional collaborative band projects like Poet, Soldier, Wiseman, King. He is currently working on his next solo album.

David Olney was born in 1948 in Providence, Rhode Island.There he began his musical career by joining Bland Simpson's band Simpson in the early 1970s. Moving to Nashville in 1973 he formed the band The X-Rays, with whom he played to acclaim during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Following on from that he has performed as a solo singer/songwriter with songs covered by such artists as Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle, Johnny Cash, Linda Ronstadt, and Laurie Lewis. He has released some 21 solo albums to date.



You are currently touring with David Olney, do you have other musical plans?

I have been playing with Olney since October 2005. When we take a break, I like to fill the space playing with other songwriters in Nashville or elsewhere. I am currently working on a new solo CD with Fran Breen on drums.

How did you got into this crazy business? I'm from Texas and played in bands around Dallas with this guy, Kip Attaway. One day Kip split to Idaho to work on an Indian Reservation. He called a few months later and asked me to join the band he formed there. We were playing Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Willis Alan Ramsey, Willie Nelson and all the other great songwriters that we heard in Dallas bars in the 70's. We were also writing our own material. I was 19 and I never looked back. I lived in Idaho on and off for 20-years.

You're mostly know as great guitar player and as a sideman but you have also released your own album. Is that something you'd like to do more of? Yes. I recorded a solo album just before I started playing with Olney. Having done so gave me a different perspective as a sideman. Since then, I have tried to make every song I am backing my own. Lucky for me I've been playing with one of the best in the world.

You're working on a new solo album. When do you hope to be able to release that?

I am probably two-thirds of the way through my new CD, recording most of it at Gail Davies' house with her husband, Rob Price. Gail has sung on the tracks. Rob is out on the road with Crystal Gayle. We'll start working again next week. I hope to be completed by May. This CD is mostly co-writes I shared with a number of songwriters last year. I am having a good time doing this.

Somtimes it's difficult for a guitarist making the transition to front person and singer. Is that something you also perceive?

I have no delusions about being the front guy. It influences what you are doing when one is a singer/songwriter and guitarist. A solo project for me is more of a statement, "These are the tools I can bring". I enjoy being in a band as a team player.

You first came to Ireland as a member of Pinto Bennett's Famous Motel Cowboys. Was that a good time?

From what I remember, it was extraordinary. In 6 weeks, we went from driving all around Ireland in a small van to playing at Wembly Arena. Phil Kaufman was our road manager... so you can imagine.

### Also you played with Gail Davies and with her son Chris Scrugg...

I have been playing with Gail since 1996. I see her fairly often and we still play the Grand Ole Opry. I learned a lot from Gail. She is the consumate performer and ultimate pro. She sings great every night. I have known Chris since he was 12 and it was a privilege to see a true prodigy grow up in front of me.

Your involved with the collaborative project Poet Soldier Wise Man King, with whom you have released a CD, how does that work for you all? The Poet, Soldier, Wiseman, King project was a one-day session. The four of us brought beer and three songs to the session and we played all the instruments except bass. Jonathan Singleton has since signed to Universal South and has penned two #I country hits in the last six-months. He buys the beer now.

Given the relaxed nature of the project it turned out to be a really enjoyable album. I assume that you played lead guitar throughout but as a band you sound good. Have you any plans for

#### When did you start working with Sergio?

We started playing together about three years ago. I'd experimented a little playing with another guitar player, Thom Jitz, Then he started to play with Mary Gauthier and I asked him if he knew anyone who could do this and he said "talk to Sergio". I called him up and we started to run the songs down. We rehearsed a good bit to get to the point where you know the song enough to be able to change things around at a live gig and you can keep it spontaneous. We did a couple of tours of Europe and we've been on the road a whole bunch.

#### How did you work on the last album?

I'd go in and start building the songs up. I'd decide how I wanted to do a song on the album, to let it go to where the song takes you. So if it called for a guitar player then I would call Sergio to come in.

#### How does this fit with you?

Sergio: Well every night has been an adventure. It's always good to play. Every gig is different. The songs totally keep my interest all the time.

## One Tough Town *was your last album*, *what is happening next*?

I've got a new one done that should be out in the summer. But also since *One Tough Town* we have put out a live CD *Live At Norm's*, which really features what we are doing live right now.

## Your website list over 20 albums you made in your career...

(*Laughs*) I'm gonna keep making them until somebody buys them.

#### You must enjoy the process...

Yeah, I like music and I like writing songs. It's my job. Every couple of years I feel that I need to be doing something recording wise. Things have changed a bit, it used to be that



recording was the big item. To me it's not that way anymore, it's turned around and the live performance is more the main thing which is healthier for the music scene. You can make a recording and just keep doing it over and over again till you get it right. But playing live you have to deliver the goods right there and then. That's the tradition that I like.

If I write I song I like then I can't wait to play it. Others I try to hold back and pick the right moment to bring them out. We're always working on a couple of new songs. That's just part of what we do.

## How much of the larger picture of what's happening around you do you filter into your songs?

I think that you do that with everything. In the process of writing I think that most of the heavy lifting is done when you're asleep, when your not thinking about it. Then you get to that point where you try to put it down on paper. Then things that you've seen over the years start to come out. Lately in the last few years I've been writing a lot with John Hadley and some with Gwil Owen. For years I'd resisted co-writing but now I'm really enjoying it. I get a couple of lines or a chorus... Sergio, John and I wrote a song called *Covington Girl*. Sergio had the melody and I like that kind of collaboration.

## Has the current economic situation affected how you work?

You know it's not been easy at any point. So I think the rest of the world is catching up to where I am. I don't think it's supposed to be easy. I was talking to someone earlier and was saying that once you're established and

further recordings? I'm glad you enjoyed it. I would love to do another project like the Poet, Soldier .... We all played guitar but as I remember, I did most of the electric parts. I doubt the same four would get together. Jonathan Singleton, who played guitar, all the drums, wrote and sang. Bruce Wallace, wrote, sang and played guitar also has signed with a Canadian record

company. I like the idea of friends showing up in the studio learning and playing each others songs in a one-day session. I am playing with a few other songwriters lately and maybe we will give it a try.

You decided to stay in Ireland at one point. Tell us about the experience of living here at the time and who you played with?

We stayed in Dublin for a year. 1991-92 was an interesting time politically in Ireland before the ecconomic rise. After the last Motel Cowboy gig ( I think at The Olympia Theater ), my wife joined me and we decided to stay with friends who were politically active in the 70's. We learned a lot of Irish history and some great stories. We ended up renting a small flat in Rathmines. I played with Tom Pacheco who took me to Nashville to record Tales From The Red Lake, Liz Ryan who is now singing opera, Celine Carroll, Pinto and Richard Dobson when they came over, also poet in Waterford, who's name I can't recall except, I usually said, "I'll have whatever he's having." I hung around the Brazen Head with Betty Mc Kenna. I played in a number of Irish country bands. This was in the time of Garth Brooks. I was the token gringo. The Stetson got me a few gigs.



POET, SOLDIER, WISEMAN, KING



You have always looked the part, is appearance an important part of the process for you?

On stage, I think one should always look a little different from the guys in the seats. I try to dress-up a bit but what I wear is what I wear everyday. Always a Motel cowboy.

You have a love of traditional country but you can also be a lot more contemporary and experimental. Do you

have a preference for either?

I try to make the right sound for the right song. Somewhere between Motley Crue and the Carter Family.

Writing and co-writing is a part of your abilities also, do you like that side?

I enjoy the writing experience. It is humbling especially writing with Pinto, Richard Dobson, Tony McClaughlin, David Olney and John Hadley. They write in paragraphs while I stumble over a word.

#### Do you find audiences different?

European audiences are the best but U.S. audiences are getting better.

#### Who are your guitar heroes?

The guitarist who influenced me most are those within a 100 or so miles from me in Texas; Lightnin' Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, Blind Lemmon Jefferson, Willie Nelson, Jimmy Vaughn, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Bugs Henderson, Freddy King. Others are; Leo Kottke, Jimi Hendrix, Duane Allman, Jimmy Page. The list is very long and contunues...

Interview by Stephen Rapid



people know who you are then you often lose the ability to be a fly on the wall. The level I'm working now I really enjoy. Meeting people and then having a pint with them at the bar. Someone like Garth Brooks or whoever is not going to able to do that.

## Did you have aspirations for that kind of celebrity?

Sure, when I first moved to Nashville I thought that I was going to tear the place up. I would try to write and to perform that way and It wasn't until I decide that that wasn't going to happen that I really found what it is that I'm supposed to do. When you're not planning to pick up girls and to make a lot of money, when you do it just because you like doing it then can get down deep into it.

## As you get older you develop a different type of perspective?

I don't think that you can really get to that point until your mind is on some feeling or emotion rather than on the pay-off.

## Ron: How does the songwriting community Nashville work?

I've been there a long time and you come in with a wave of people you came into town at about the same time that you did and you hang out with them. I moved to town in '73 and then every year people jump ship. My contemporaries would have been people like Hugh Moffatt and Richard Dobson but as I said so many of them end up leaving. The standard then was Guy Clark. He'd been there at least a couple of years before me. When he did his first album then you thought "well, this could happen". He was

an accessible guy, you could run into him in a bar. It made you focus your attention. I found this place, well it existed before I found it, called Bishop's Pub where you could play every night for a year anyway. It was about a mile from Downtown. You got to do 20 minuets and then you could pass the hat. It wasn't much money but every night you had a place to play. If you had new songs you had a place to try them out. I learned a whole bunch there as you had to learn to work an audience. Guy would come in every now and then and also Townes. Richard (Dobson) was there a lot. Also a guy named Jeff Morgan, he kinda dropped away and later moved out to Oregon. He wrote a song that Dickie Lee did 9,999,999 Tears.It wasn't a huge hit, but it was someone vou knew. Rodney Crowell played there too but he went off to tour with Emmylou Harris. Then when she did 'Til I gain Control Again and he was off and running.

## *Ron: People like Gary Burr or Ralph Murphy, do you meet them?*

I've never ran in that circle. They're the more successful commercial writers. I was just sorta banging my head against another wall. I know all those guys but my attempts to write that kind of music were pretty awful.

Ron: Those guys come over for songwriting seminars where they work together to come up with a song...

That would drive me crazy.

*Ron: How often to you tour in Europe now?* First time I came over was at the start of the 90's for a tour in Germany, it was fairly brutal as back then I was carrying LPs around, a bit like a bag of bricks. I did some work in Holland but hadn't hooked up with a booking agent so it was a bit hit and miss. So I've been coming over for around twenty years I guess. The audiences in Europe seem to appreciate the words more than back home, I don't know why that is but there seems to be a deeper tradition of liking songs over here. Holland especially has been very good for me.

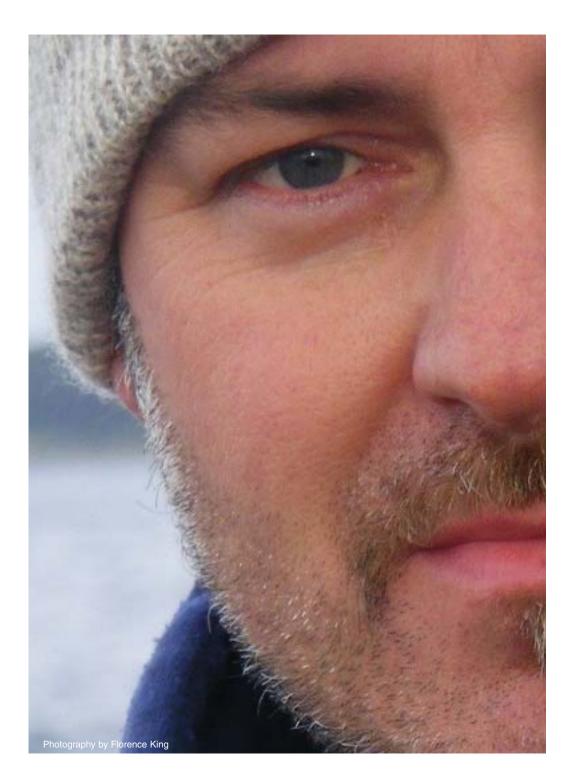
Some of your songs take on a historical perspective. Do you read a lot about a particular period of history before you write or is it a more organic process? I do read a lot. But I don't think I know more history than most people. I don't want to write history songs I would rather write about some person and to put them in a place or time. Like 1917 about the World War 1 soldier, I didn't want to write about World War 1 that just turned out to be where the guy was. You know if you say you know what you're doing when you start to write a song you're kind of bullshitting. Basically you do whatever has to be done to get the song. After it's finished then you can make up the story about how you were trying to do this or that when, in fact, you were just trying to get the song out. It's funny a lot of people say that they would do anything to do what I do but it's just what I do. I don't write for specific things, I just tend to write. You go in and try to pick and choose the songs that will work together.

Interview by Stephen Rapid and Ronnie Norton





## MICHAEL WESTON KING STRAIGHT SHOOTER



How has your perception of your relationship with the music industry and your career changed since the early days of the Good Sons?

In all honesty, sometimes I feel like I am no further on now than I was then, certainly in terms of profile but then at other times, I feel like an elder statesman, especially when I get asked so often about the business, or song writing or touring or other artists that I have worked with etc. I think it is impossible for an individual to see where they fit into the industry, unless you are Dylan or someone of that stature. I think it is only something that can be judged by others. I guess that does not really answer your question. It all depends what you call the "music industry". Most music is made by self sufficient artists releasing records themselves or on small labels with virtually no money. Ever since I started just doing my own thing and dealing with independent labels (from early 90's) I don't feel I have any relationship with the BIG music industry, apart from the occasional big support slot. I, like many other, will just go on ploughing my own furrow.

## Prior to that you played with Gary Hall and The Stormkeepers which places you at the early days of roots rock. Did you enjoy that time?

I enjoyed it very much, for the most part, until the usual band politics took over. I was introduced to Gary by Geoff Davies at Probe in Liverpool and we hit it off immediately, shared the same love of certain artists, especially all the paisley underground stuff that was coming along, REM, Green On Red, Rain Parade etc, as well as those early records by Nanci, Dwight and Lyle, and we turned each other onto a lot of stuff as well. I will always be grateful to him for opening my ears to The Triffids. My first experiences of touring abroad were with that band, and we had a great old time, especially in Italy. One summer we toured there for 4 weeks, it was heaven, those days are long gone sadly.

## As a writer and performer you have received a good deal of critical praise, does that count for a lot?

Well, it helps your confidence, and makes you feel like you really are doing something right. If you were getting bad reviews all the time you might think, uh oh, maybe I am not any good at this. So, critical praise helps the fragile ego, but whether it helps sell records, that is another matter all together. I think however, the most rewarding praise is from other musicians. People such as Townes, Chris Hillman and others have been kind enough to say really genuine things about my work. On my last studio album, *A New Kind of Loneliness*, I covered the great Gilbert O'Sullivan song, *Alone Again, Naturally*, and he was generous enough to send me a fax saying thank you for cutting his song and telling me how much he liked the version, and the album overall, selecting certain songs as his favourite and drawing comparison between my voice and Paddy McAloon. That was a real buzz.

## By now you have, most likely, arrived at a place where the reality of making music for monetary gain is a distant horizon, so what is it that sustains you?

It is a vocation. Having toured, and played, and written as much as I have over the years, you can't just turn it off and stop. Well, I can't. Even though the continual cloud of financial worry hangs over me all the time, I just plough on. Don't get me wrong, music has made me money over the years, not a lot, but enough to just about sustain a certain lifestyle, and, while there are songs out there, there is always a chance of one being picked up, and that bigger pay

day coming in. A song of mine was in a US TV show last year called *Army Wives*. I never saw the show but I hear it was pretty good. It did not become a huge hit, but if the show had become the next *Friends* or *Sopranos* then things would be different, so, when you have songs, there is always that chance.

## You have played as a solo artist, as a band member and in combinations between that. Do you have a preference for performing in a particular way?

No, all have their good sides and their down sides. I love the solo thing, when you are totally in control and can go off at a tangent, do whatever you want without freaking out the bass player or whoever. Also, the experience of being alone, on stage, just you and an audience, is very powerful, and not at all the same thing that you get from a bunch of people playing on stage, confronting an audience. That said, like anyone, playing with a bunch of mates and/or a bunch of great players and really gelling, is magical, and something I wish I could afford to do more of. I have musician friends all over Europe and the US, so whenever I am on tour solo, often as not I will call upon them to come down and sit in. I toured Holland and Germany and was joined on the Dutch dates by a great pedal steel player/guitar player called Rob Van Duren. It keeps me on my toes, and adds variety to the set.

## You are often seen as a roots/Americana artist. Is this a category that you're comfortable with or are you coming from a broader base?

Not happy with it at all. I am a singer/songwriter, an English singer/songwriter. In the same way Ron Sexsmith is a singer songwriter, or Boo Hewerdine is a singer songwriter, or Elvis Costello is a singer/songwriter, or Roddy Frame... or fuckin Bob Dylan. I have been, and seen my self as one, ever since I gave up being in pop bands in the early 80's. I still love good pop music, as well as soul music, country music, folk music, certain aspects of rock music, classical music, and all my influences go into my songs. When I formed The Good Sons my ideas was to combine what the likes of The Jayhawks and Uncle Tupelo were doing with the great songwriting of people such as Townes and Guy Clarke. I listened to them a lot and tried to write in that style for a while. It just so happens that was at what was then seen as the start of Alt Country, and no bands over here were doing that, and for a while I was happy for me and the band to be given that tag. But not any longer. For a start the band does not exist any more and I am solo artist, and secondly, the whole Alt Country thing is a an overloaded band wagon for which the wheels fell off a long time ago, in my opinion

## You have recorded with great artists like Townes Van Zandt and played with the likes of Chris Hillman. Who do you most admire as a songwriter and performer?

I suppose I would still have to pick Elvis Costello as the songwriter I admire the most. Maybe it is because I have been with him since the start and followed his career, seen him a zillion times, in all sorts of guises, stuck by him though thick and thin, and there has been plenty of thin in recent years (North anyone!!). Also, a number his songs have been very important to me on a personal basis, so they are very close to my heart. Is he a better songwriter than Bob Dylan, Hank Williams, Randy Newman, Cole Porter, Lennon/McCartney, Irving Berlin, Tom Waits, Neil Young, Merle Haggard? Arguably not, though in my opinion he is pretty close, but he is the one I have the most common bond with. The performers I admire are the ones who are just untouchable on stage, people like Prince (his Purple Rain tour was, still is one of the greatest ever gigs I have seen), Elvis in the 50's, and his early 70's Vegas shows before it went to hell. Bobby Darin, Ricky Martin in front of an audience of 5,000 people singing *La Vida Loca*, people going fuckin' nuts! That is performing, not Jay Farrar mumbling for 60 minutes.

There is a great art to being a solo performer and it is much more than just standing there singing the songs with an acoustic guitar, anyone can do that, but the solo performers I admire are the ones who can completely captivate an audience not just with their songs, or playing but with their personality, their wit, their stories, opening themselves up and sharing very poignant, intimate things with a bunch of strangers. Townes was a master at that. Jackie Leven is a master at that. Although I never saw them live, in person I know Tim Hardin and Phil Ochs would also be in that category.

## The tour you have recently completely with Peter Bruntnell and Jeb Loy Nichols how did that go as an experience?

It was really, really enjoyable. Peter and Jeb are very funny, warm, generous people, we all had a ball, as well as learning a lot from each other. There is a common link between us, all singer/ songwriters, even though we are coming from slightly different musical backgrounds. Pete would do great, varied covers, (The Smiths, Roy Harper, Glen Campbell), and Jeb is a real afficianado on reggae, southern soul and old time country. Learnt a lot from him. We ended the set each night by all singing *In The Pines*.

Over the years I have done quiet a lot of "in-the-round" tours, I did a couple (in UK and Europe) with Jackie Leven and Andy White under the name An Englishman, An Irishman and A Scotsman, then a European tour a few years back with Peter Case (on of my all time fave singer songwriters) and the great John Doe (from X), and than last year a short tour with Jackie and Robert Fisher from the Willard Grant Conspiracy. All of which were great, but then again, we were all able to choose who we toured with. I have done impromptu in-the-round gigs in the States and realised pretty quickly, that I wished I was somewhere else!

## Leading on from that your next project is an album of duets, which can be a lot of fun. How did that come about?

It is something I have been wanting to do for ages. I am married to one of the finest female singers in the country, and although Lou (Dalgleish) has sung backing vocals on my albums before, we have not made an actual album together. I originally had the idea 6-7 years ago (well before the Mark Lanegan/Isobelle Campbell album came out), intending to cut it in Nashville. My mate Clive Gregson was going to produce it and the plan was to use most of Nanci Griffiths Blue Moon Orchestra. I went to my label at the time with the idea, and the budget, but they said it was too expensive and so the project just got put to one side, until last summer when I decided I was going to make it work.

I managed to raise most of the funds from my fan base, and then Lou and I went ahead and cut it at Gold Top studios in Chalk Farm, London, with Neil Brockbank producing. Neil has produced the last few Nick Lowe albums, the wonderful, latest, Geraint Watkins album, as well as a lovely album by Tres Chicas in 2006. Also, the fact that his studio is very much a live room, with plenty of old analogue gear , meant it was perfect for this project.

Got some great players in too; on guitar it's Martin Belmont (Graham Parker and The Rumour, Nick Lowe, Elvis Costello, Ducks Deluxe) on piano and organ there's Geraint Watkins (Van Morrison, Bill Wyman's Rhythm Kings, Nick Lowe). The bass player is Kevin Foster (Jackie Leven, Doll By Doll, Los Pistoleros. We used a couple of players on drums: Bobby Irwin (Van Morrison, Nick Lowe, Carlene Carter) or Jim Russell (Scotty Moore, James Burton, Bob Geldof). The violinist was Bob Loveday (Van Morrison, Nick Lowe, Bob Geldof) and on pedal steel Alan Cook (The Charlatans, Chris Hillman, Jackie Leven.

## *Is there something about a duet that makes it different from the way you normally approach recording a song?*

Well, for a start you have consider the other vocalist, how the song is shared out lyrically. Also, making this record with Neil and these quick, spontaneous players meant it was approached very differently from how I normally record. This was much more live, very few overdubs, even the lead vocals. Most of the vocals on the album are the original takes, cut with the band. Something Lou has had experience of, but not something I have done before. The players were so good that they really listened to the singing and played accordingly, differing their approach when backing either myself, or Lou. The idea was to try and cut it just like those old Country session guys would when making records with Porter Wagoner & Dolly Parton, or George & Tammy.

#### When do you hope to release the album and do you intend to tour the album?

We are talking to labels now regarding a deal for the duets project, and I really hope we can get it out by the summer. We do intend to tour it, but want to use the band that made the album, or as many as possible, and that won't be cheap, so initially we are looking at festivals. If the album comes out, is well received and there is demand for club/theatre shows, and it make sense financially, or if the label will underwrite a tour, then yes, we will be out there. These songs, and just doing the whole duet thing, will be great fun live, a joy to sing and play....even if some of the songs have a dark underbelly.

## In 2006 you released Love's A Cover. Doing an album of covers allows you to concentrate on your vocals and on the song arrangements and gives you a break from writing your own material, was that the intention?

Not really. I always love playing other peoples' songs and there are always one or 2 covers in my set. The *Love's A Cover* album came about simply because over the years I have recorded cover versions for tribute albums, magazine cover mount CDs, for my own albums and basically, there was almost enough to make, what I felt, was a good varied album, which reflected some of my musical tastes. I went into the studio to record 2-3 more songs and then we had it.

#### You have recorded other writers before, what do you look for in a song that you want to play?

Usually a lyric I can relate to, often my choice of song is based on wishing I had written it, to suit a certain time or event in my life. Such as recording *No More Songs* by Phil Ochs, and *Annie* by Ronnie Lane back in 1999. When I was making *A New Kind of Loneliness* my mum died, just as we were about to finish it, so there was no real time to write or add any songs that expressed with



how I felt about it. But *Alone Again Naturally* did. Since then I have written about it, and those songs will appear on the next album, albeit 2 years after the event.

## Some towns are good for you but how do you rate Ireland and Dublin as places to play?

I have to be honest and say Ireland has always been pretty tough for me, as I would be fair to say it has for a lot of artists similar to me. Don't know why, Ireland has a great history of "song" and so one would think that singer/songwriters would thrive. of course some do, but so many great ones come over and play to a handful of people (usually the same people!). The irony is, the fans I do have in Ireland are incredibly supportive, as are certain journalists and radio people. I guess I could just use a few more!

#### How has being a artist in the digital age affected you?

I fear I spend too much time looking at a fuckin' MAC instead of playing the guitar, or writing songs. Yes, it is easy now to send your song around the world, or interact with someone who has never heard of you, so I guess that is good. BUT, from the point of view of being a music fan, it does take away the thrill of discovering an artist or album by taking a chance and buying it in a record

shop. If you have paid for it you may give it more time. What I don't like is that music is now much more disposable. For people of my age it was always something that was, and it still is, something of great meaning and value. I also hate the fact that MP3s is removing the importance of album art work and the album sleeve. That is an art form in itself, something I am proud of with my records, and I always want them to be presented as well as possible. I loved poring over an album sleeve, reading credits etc.

#### What do you hope that the future holds for you?

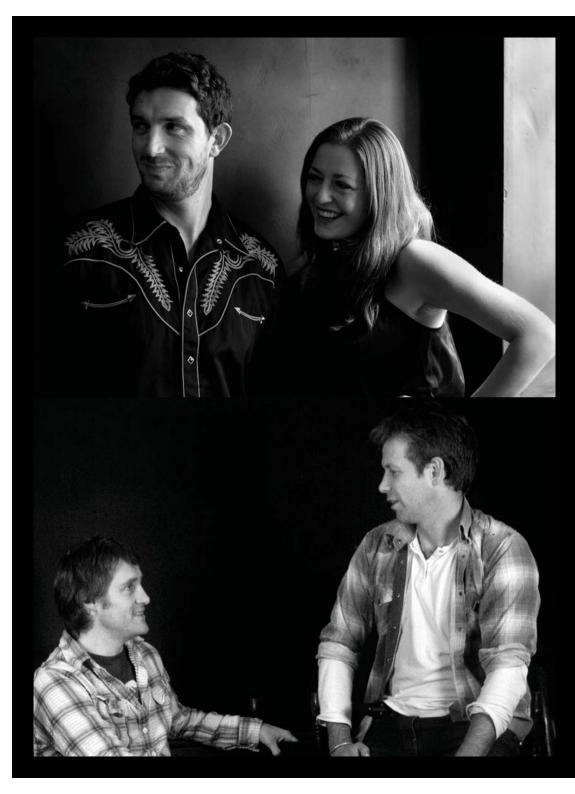
In the short term, I hope we get a good deal for the *My Darling Clementine* duets album, with a good supportive label who can see the real potential in this album, and that the record does sufficiently well to enable me to take the band on the road, and that we get to make another. I will also be making a new solo album this year and, as with every album I make, I hope it is a progression artistically and also nudges my profile up a little more, sells more and in turns brings more people to my shows. I have also been meaning to write a book, about what I feel are some of the great 'lost songs', ones that should have been heard by more people, I REALLY want to get that written this year.

Long term, I hope I can continue to get by/survive/make a living (delete as appropriate) from being a professional musician, and that sooner, rather than later, one of my songs generates a decent income for me, and in turn, for my children. I would love for my publishing, after I have gone, to generate a reasonable amount of income that helps my kids. Not so they are idolising but so they can see that what their old man was doing all his life did pay off financially eventually.



THE 9 PIECE COUNTRY MUSIC BAND FROM BRAY COUNTY WICKLOW HAVE JUST RELEASED THE FINEST ALBUM OF THEIR CAREER. WE SPOKE TO LEAD SINGER AND SONGWRITER NEIL TOBIN ABOUT THE NEW ALBUM AND THE ISSUES INVOLVED WITH TOURING A LARGE LINE-UP WHEN YOU ARE AN INDEPENDENT BAND.





#### You have recorded a new album was that a good experience?

We really enjoyed the making the album and we had done a couple of year's preparation for it, so we felt that we hit the ground running. But, having said that we were also lucky to have worked with two people, Leo Pearson and Jim Lauderdale, who were able to bring other ideas. So it that sense it was really good as we had an idea what we wanted to do but ended up with something that we were happier with.

#### Will promoting the album with your large line-up you have be difficult?

Everyone has commitments and there are 9 of us, all working and what have you. But we find that good as we have a balance and not so much pressure on us. We would hope that the album, if it's considered half decent, would be able to do a bit of work for us. But then the reality is that we need to back that up so this Summer we want to push it more live and also with radio. It is tough though for us to get gigs. It has to be a festival or open, broad genre for us, as a country band, to play. We had the Midlands Festival but unfortunately that's gone. As were quite a specialised band there are not that many opportunities as there may be for a similar band over in the States. So we have to go and look to find places to play. Hopefully some good support gigs too. But again the new album should help with that.

#### After the Irish release are you going to licence it in other countries?

Absolutely. I'd be curious to see how it will travel. When we started out and people realised that we were playing straight-up country, that it was for the novelty of it, that were were serious a prominent person in the industry said to me "why are you going that route" he felt we were "selling sand to the arabs". The attitude was that nobody can infiltrate that market from the outside as that's their thing. So as I said I'm curious to see the reaction.

#### That will also mean touring?

To that end we need to feel that there will be a demand, or rather a call for us to go. If someone said "we really like the album, why don't you come over" that would be better than cold calling. I think a couple of the songs could be well received. I'd be interested to hear them on the radio. I think that that's a test. I like to record something then put it on a cassette and listen to it in the car. In that light this album is better than the last one for me.

#### Would you consider touring with smaller core band unit?

While I feel that it would hurt some of the band if they weren't a part of it and I'd feel exactly the same way, the reality is that if opportunity arises then we have to look at that. We're very honest with each other in that we know that some people can commit and some people can't, and we are a big band, so we have to look at the best way forward. On an album there may be often lots of session players but when the artist tours it may only be a four or five piece band, so it is possible. But when it comes to recording it needs to be the full band. We'll find a way to move forward and I don't think that any of us will rule that out. People are always worried about booking a nine-piece band. Whereas if you're just on your own with a guitar or with a couple of people it's a lot easier. It's tricky and has been suggested before that we do some gigs as Bray Vista but with a smaller amount of players. The feeling is that if the songs are in any way good that they'll work in whatever way... Alison's vocal and my vocal with a guitar or whatever but obviously the best way is ti have the full band.



#### What was Jim Lauderdale's input into the recording?

His input was subtle but it makes all the difference, particularly with the vocals. Working with Jim he'd give you the space to do what you wanted to. So when he suggested something he'd already thought about it and we could see that it was the right way to go. It was a good move as you're working with someone who has a lot of experience and has learned how to use tricks in the studio, and there are a number of tricks that are used in a studio, and he was willing to share them with us. That worked out really well. We felt we had the good mix of Leo who was dynamic and youthful and Jim who was a seasoned journeyman. The two of them together really complemented each other.

#### Do you consider Bray Vista a country band or something more alternative?

Well everybody who know this genre tends to have stereotypes that are evoked when you talk about country and about Ireland. Those two words together have problems and I'm not saying that disrespectfully as a lot of those players are very good players, but that that was the market at that time. We're always a bit nervous and apprehensive about going that route and to be taken seriously. It's all about perception, which is a shame.

#### You are the main songwriter, how do you go about your writing?

I find that what is the best way for me is to try to develop the craft and learn a few tricks. I find that I'll start by hearing something that somebody says and I think "I'll have that line or that idea" and also I'm not afraid to listen to a lot of artists and to be influenced.and to hear a good idea. Musically I find a way to do it, I find a structure, a mix of melody and then bring it to the band. They help with that by listening to a song with just me on the guitar, They're then like my test as they will let me know straight away if they like it. I'm still a young man so I have time try, not to write older than my years, but to project my self to an older situation. I feel more comfortable writing about heartache. Not just heartache but things that resonate. That why I love the lyrical side of country music. That's what I listen for, even if it's a good singer I'm not interested unless the lyrics are good. That what I'm trying to develop - to be a better writer. That takes time and I know I'm only learning. But as along as you get a few good tracks on the album then I'm happy.

#### Is it difficult to decide when the time is right to release the album?

There's always that thing of sitting on the nest egg, of never being ready to let it go but I feel now that we need to put it out to then get behind it and push it. It's reception will then dictate our next moves. If people say "this is good" and, to be honest, I'll be disappointed if it's not well received, even if people feel that "this is not my thing" that they at least see that we can play country. There are people though who do appreciate the music. So it's trying to get it out to them. So if they heard us more on the radio they might say "I'll check them out". We have to be sure who we target with this. You have to have faith in what you've just done too. And we do we have faith in this album. The UK as well is somewhere we need to get into. We had a song played by Bob Harris, I don't know how he got it, but it was great for someone like that to play one of your tracks as a lot of people listen to him and if we could get more people like him on board that would help. I read or hear about an album myself and I get it from the internet and there are so many good people out there. What I'd like is the opportunity to play with some of these guys, to do festivals, gigs or whatever. It's a dream of ours, mine especially to play in the States to people who love country music. To go in and try and prove ourselves. I'd like to see how we'd do at that. Even though we are about to put this album out I want to record again with Bray Vista.

#### At the moment you're working abroad. Do you plan to come home?

I want to come home and to be able to commit time to the album and I have new songs that I want to bring to the band. I want to play with Bray Vista, full stop. I'm recording the new songs as demos then I'll work them up with the band. We need new material, that's the way it works with us. I've made the decision to go for it. If I don't then I know I'll be disappointed later. It's not for the money or glory or any of that it's to give it it's dues. We did it with Leo and Jim, we put a lot of effort into it so get behind it and not sit on it. That's my feeling anyway.

#### Since you started there are a growing number of roots bands, which must be good?

Yeah, there are some very good band. We're together nine years now, which is almost unbelievable to us but we're not playing that kind of acoustic based roots music. We like to think of it as a more country soul thing. I don't want to label it but we're being influenced by more straight up country but with a bit of soul.

#### Midlands wasn't a commercial success but was it a good experience to play?

All the artists we met and spoke to were open and so down to earth. Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings were a treat, to see two people with two guitars, it just shows you how it's done. It was a lesson in how it should be done. I was impressed with the bands, the Hillbilly Allstars especially. I like all the acts but personally I prefer to see people with bands because I'm into the music. The previous year the Hacienda Brothers were my favourites. They were in the second smaller tent, a more intimate venue. I think they we're superb. Their guitar player was a great player as was the pedal steel player. I look at them and see what they can do and it's encouraging, It was super cool and played by relatively young guys, that's an inspiration.

WE ALSO ASKED A COUPLE OF QUESTIONS OF ALISON BYRNE THE BAND'S CO-LEAD AND HARMONY SINGER

### You joined Bray Vista after they first started, at first to do some backing vocals, how aware where you of country music at that time?

I wasn't very aware of country music at the time. I had a rather different idea of it than what I saw in Bray Vista. I'd seen the lads a few times and thought that the gigs were so raw and energetic. I realised after some time that a lot of the music I'd heard at home was what I ended up really liking myself.

#### What do you think is the overall reaction to the band from a younger audience?

I think the overall reaction is variable. Our recordings are slightly more mellow than the live performances although I think that this more energetic feeling in the music has been captured very well on the new record "Let it Ride". I think that if a younger audience manage to catch us that they tend to really enjoy it.

#### What does the future hold for the band in the wake of this new album?

As regards the future, it's difficult to say. Getting to work with Jim and Leo was wonderful and I think we've stepped up our game because of this. We will continue to write, play and record and other than that it's all in the stars.

INTERVIEW BY STEPHEN RAPID



#### BRAY VISTA LIVE AT ACADEMY 2 IN DUBLIN





# TOMETOHEYBALE

Tom Lewis was a founder member of pioneering country music group The Wagoneers, a young band bringing a new energy to the genre and subsequently has played with a host of artists and currently is a member of country music supergroup Heybale



Tom, The Wagoneers were formed in the 1980's. Were they your first band and how did you get involved?

The first band I was in was started in Lubbock, Texas. We were called the Hubcats and our first show was at the original Stubb's. The singer was a Buddy Holly impersonator who tempered his appearance for a more Stray Cats look. That band lasted about 4 months. I moved to Austin in '85 and remembered Monte from a Buddy Holly festival I attended years earlier. We met up and once I heard his songs and influences I knew he had to meet my friend Brent Wilson, who was in Sixgun, the second band I was in who also included Jim Wallace who now plays with Reverend Horton Heat.

Monte Warden has said that being on A&M, who had no experience with country music, was a big factor for the band not making a bigger break-through. What would your opinion be?

Considering the music we were doing I think we did have a good breakthrough. It was all our choice to sign with A&M after they offered us full creative control. I just don't think Monte had the patience for us to build a career over a long period. He wanted instant fame and stardom and when it didn't happen he started blaming factors within our organisation.

The Wagoneers were undoubtedly ahead of their time, and have been called one of the first alt.country bands but, in truth, wasn't your aim to play real country music but with a contemporary edge?

Our aim was to play country music. Our influences showed that we all listened to more than just country music. Craig and I were heavily into the Clash and that showed through in our live shows. All we really wanted was to dress in fancy cowboy suits and play country shuffles.

Do you ever see The Wagoneers getting back together again in any shape or form and do you guys keep in touch?

About 6 years ago Patrick Clifford, our A&R guy from A&M, moved to Austin. He mentioned that he would love to spearhead a reunion of all the original members of the band. I was into it and so was Brent. When I asked Craig he was also into it, offering to take off a year from his day job of driving a city bus. We met Monte to talk about it and he was completely uninterested, telling us that was something he did as a kid and he has matured now. I think his pride kept him from missing out on a blessed opportunity. Brent has since moved back from Nashville and him and I have been playing a lot together. I talk with Craig about once a month. He has retired from the music business and still drives a bus for the city of Austin. I see Monte around town every few months.

Given that you were all very young when you made those two albums, which still stand the test of time, what do you think you could all bring to recording if you were to approach those songs now?

What we would bring is the experience we have all learned since we broke up. If we recorded those songs today they would sound more professional but maybe the charm of those recordings were our inexperience and exuberance of youth. You have played country music, more or less, all your life, is that the music that is in your blood?

It has become the music that is nearest to my heart. I listen to everything but still love old country music the most.

How do you feel about the state of country music these days as "country" radio has long been accused of pushing the real country music, past and present, to the fringes?

At this point it's a bit like beating a dead horse. Things change. I'm sure the same was said when the era of the Big Bands ended. Hell, there's really no rock and roll anymore. I just think the biggest statement one can make is make your own music and make it truthfully and let that be your loudest statement.

To move things forward you're currently playing and recording with Heybale, is that your dream band?

It is my favourite musical expression. Playing with guys like Redd and Earl have spoiled me. I look forward to every Sunday getting on stage and making honest country music for people to dance to.

#### You also played with Junior Brown, how was that?

I'm not telling any sordid stories. I'm glad I got to tour and record with him but at times it was a trying experience. He still calls me on occasion to sub for his main drummer.

What ambitions do you still have as a musician?

I have to play drums on a regular basis or I would go crazy. I'm blessed that I am able to make a good living doing music and hope that new projects keep coming in the future.

Drummers, especially in country music, seem to be less know than, say, the steel or guitar players. Who were you're influences?

I love Jerry Allison's drumming on the Buddy Holly music. He was only 16 years old but so seasoned and tasteful. I love Earl Palmer, John Bonham and Buddy Harmon.

Who, of your contemporaries, do you admire? Ken Coomer of Nashville, Frosty Smith and || Johnson of Austin.

You've been playing drums for 30 years, did you make the right career choice? Hell yes!

Can a musician survive in the current economic climate or do you need to have another source of income?

I have been doing great. Even in tough times people still love to hang out in a bar and listen to live music. It makes the cares of the day vanish for a little bit.

How often to you get to tour outside of the States? Heybale is going again to be playing in Norway this summer.

## CHUCK MEAD BETTING ON THE FUTURE

THE BR549 FRONTMAN TALKS TO LONESOME HIGHWAY ABOUT HIS FIRST SOLO ALBUM JOURNEYMAN'S WAGER AND HIS PLANS FOR THE FUTURE AND THE FATE OF HIS FORMER BAND

#### This is your first solo album, how different was your approach to preparing for it from a BR549 album?

Usually in BR, we will have been on the road playing some or most of the songs live for a while. With my record, the songs are the result of having a publishing deal. For about 2 1/2 years I actually had a steady songwriting gig. We did some demos of some of the songs but many of them we just worked out in the studio.

#### At first the album seem quite a big move in terms of sound but in truth the dial hasn't shifted all that much. Did you see it as a close relation to your previous work?

I wanted my first solo record to be instantly discernible from BR but familiar at the same time. I mean it's still me so you're going to get quite a bit of hillbilly but I didn't want to just do a BR record without BR. I kind of see this as a Hillbilly - Pub Rock record because there is a lot of that in my psyche too.

#### You worked with Ray Kennedy as producer, did you feel that that outside perspective was needed for the album?

Ray and I have been friends for quite a few years and worked together on a few projects - he mixed the Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings tribute records that Dave Roe and I produced and mixed down the BR record "Tangled In The Pines" but we wanted to do something from start to finish together. When I finally decided to do a solo record, it was a natural to ask Ray to work on it with me. He has great ideas and ears plus he and I are musically coming from a similar place. He likes to get lost in the vortex of the recording studio (it's like being in a submarine) and go at it until it's done and I like working that way too. We had great fun and he he helped me sonically articulate what I was going for.

#### The players involved on the album are an topnotch team. Who's involved with your Grassy Knoll Boys live line-up?

One of the great things about living in Nashville is your favourite players are right here in town. Mark Miller has



playing with BR the last few years. He's one of the secret treasures here in town and I can't imagine playing a gig without him. We sing together as well as Gary Bennett and I sang together which is really saying something. I just hope nobody steals him away. Carco Clave is a fantastic multi-instrumentalist that I've known for years who has played with a slew of people over the years (Asleep At The Wheel included) and he seems to be there everytime I need him. He even filled in on BR tour a few years back. The rest is a rotating group of great musicians. Mark Horn (who played on the record - Ray and I referred to the Mark Miller/Mark Horn rhythm section as "the Marks Brothers") played live for a year or so but kind of took himself off of the road so another terrific musician Martin Lynds has been playing drums lately. It's Nashville so there is a whole slew full of talented people I love to play with.

#### In your career you've experienced the full range of record companies, from major to minor, with all that entails at each level. What would you say was the biggest reason for BR549 not managing to make that transition from cult to commercial success?

Nobody can really answer that question. I mean we worked our asses off - there were a few years where we played over 250 dates in a year, we had a great record company Arista/BMG. Everybody seemed to like us but we never had the "big hit". I still run in to bigwigs in the music biz and they say to me "I thought you guys were going to be huge." I feel pretty good about what we did. We made the music we liked and had fun. I'm not a bit ashamed about what BR549 has left behind - so far. We're not defunct, just on hiatus.

#### Not that that in any way detracts from the achievements that BR549 has had as musicians and performers. You have said that BR5 will make some special appearances on an irregular basis. Does that mean that for, all intents and purposes you are now a solo artist?

Well yes. It's a lot easier to make decisions on your own behalf than get a band consensus. A lot faster too. It feels good for me right now to be a solo artist. I've always been in a band my whole life and no matter what you say, that's a hard thing having everyone making the final decision. Somebody always feels ripped off.

#### Was the break natural, the right thing to do now, or has Donnie Herron's involvement as a Bob Dylan player affected that overall decision?

Well it kind of went hand in hand. We (BR) were just sort of treading water when Donnie got the call from Bob. Who wouldn't want to work with a great musical mind like Bob? Donnie is a top notch player and he deserves a top notch gig and Dylan is as about as top notch as you can get. We can all learn a lot from Bob. We did a lot of shows with him and he was always gracious and encouraging and I'll always thank him for that.

#### Allied to that the record industry has changed dramatically over recent times, how has that affected you?

Well over here in the US, I've released my record on my own label through a great marketing group called Thirty Tigers. I have always felt sort of like an indentured servant to record companies but the way things are now, for me, it's better to own everything. Actually quite a few years ago Buck Owens told me that. "Chuck what you've gotta do is start your own label". And that was even before the bottom fell out of the music industry. Don't get me wrong, I have benefited greatly from being on a major label - our music has been heard all around the world but right now in my position, I can do the same thing an indie label would do, hire the same people an indie label would hire but at the end of the day, it's mine.

## As a working musician will these recessionary times be a good or bad thing overall?

It's yet to be known. I do know that there are some festivals that aren't as big as they used to be and some that aren't around at all. I like to think that people will still want to forget their worries for a while and lay down a little cash on music. Just maybe not as much as they have in the past.

## Are you optimistic about the future, both as a musician and as an American?

Are you kidding me? We've got a president that's my age. I feel very optimistic. I know it won't change over night. There has been some very destructive behaviour and out and out crime perpetrated in America's name in the last decade or so and that's going to take a while to correct. But I've got to tell you that there is a feeling of "We're getting back on the right track". For me at least. It's nice to have an articulate smart guy in charge again.

#### You have done work as a writer for a publishing firm does that explain why there are a lot of co-writes on the album or is that something you feel inclined to?

When you get a publishing deal, they always put you with other writers to see what comes out. I never really did much co-writing in the past and then suddenly I had to do it. It's just another musical chop and the more you do it, the better you get at it. You can learn a lot from writing a song with somebody. You teach each other something. Writing is an intensely personal thing and co-writing is a little like sleeping with the another person. You have to let them in emotionally to a certain extent in order to get anything worthwhile out of it but I know I can sit in a room with another person and a blank page and we can come out with something. That's the Nashville way.

#### As a writer are you more a lyric or a melody man?

To me I feel like I can do both. I'm getting better at both. Truth is I'm not sure how it works but I'm glad it does.

## Who would you like to write with if the opportunity arose?

Paul McCartney, Nick Lowe, Elvis Costello, Willie Nelson.

#### Who made the choice of the George Harrison song for the album and what did you like about it?

I came up with the idea a few years ago to do a shuffle version (it's sort of a shuffle anyway) and I'd do it down on Lower Broad and people would get a kick out of it. It's always been one of my favourite late-era Beatles tunes (flipside of "Ballad of John and Yoko") and Ray is a Beatle nut too so I knew we could do it justice in the studio. But it was my wife who said "You're crazy if you don't put 'Old Brown Shoe' on your record". Since she's the label head. I had to do it.

#### An element of humour has always been a part of what you do, is it important to have fun doing what you do?

It would just be a job if I didn't have fun. I'm no pencil pusher. The thing about humour though, is there is always an element of truth in it.

#### Are there any plans for the Hillbilly Allstars to gig this year and there was also some talk last time we spoke of doing some recording?

We did get in the studio a couple of years ago and put together two songs but then Paul and his wife had another baby, Robert got into another project, Collie moved down to Florabama and I started working on my record. Robert and I discussed a HBAS show just recently so I suppose sometime we'll get together and do some shows.

## What where the high points of your career to date?

Doing shows with Bob, Keith Richards, George Jones, Willie Nelson getting to hang with them. Playing all over the world. Shit, just not having a job is a thrill.



Some people always took away from what BR549 did by saying you were, in essence, a human jukebox playing the music from another era. Whereas I think that you introduced a lot of new people to a fine body of music and kept the form alive. In retrospect can you see both points of view!

You say "human jukebox" as if it's a bad thing. I challenge anyone to play for five hours a night with no break and not do covers. I challenge anyone to play for five hours with no break and not repeat a song period. Hell we were playing what we loved. We always from the first gig played original songs and the rest were songs that we knew just to fill up the other four hours. Most of what we knew were old country songs. It feels good to do old Johnny Horton, Cash, Hank Williams and Charley Pride songs. But we would do anything that came into our heads. I remember one night doing a killer version of the Ramones' "I Want To Be Well". Donnie and Gary had never even heard that song before but that made it sound great and fresh. Sometimes people would request something we didn't know and so we'd go home, find the song and learn it for the next night. It was great fun. I recently started playing down at Robert's again now and then. I do songs off of my record, BR songs and Johnny Horton, Cash, Hank Williams etc. I have a larger body of work now so it's not so many covers but the spirit is the same. Whatever I think of or is requested - with a nice tip of course ...

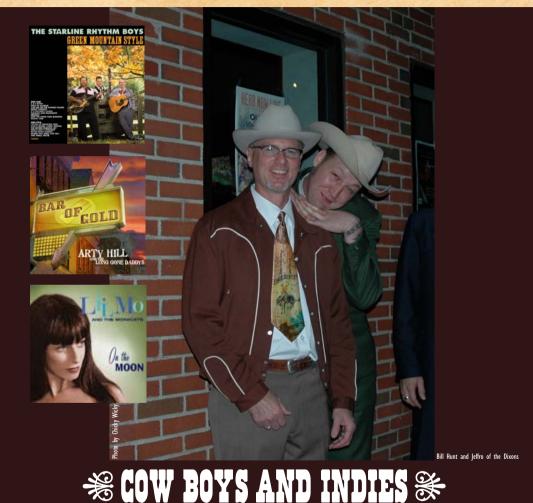
#### Finally Chuck congratulations on a great album. There are plans for a European album I believe, how about live dates?

I will have a European release and I will be over to play shows.

Interview by Stephen Rapid

## COW ISLAND MUSIC

COUNTRY, ROCKABILLY, HONKY TONK, WESTERN, SWING, AMERICANA AND ALL STOPS ALONG THE WAY



WJ "Bill" Hunt is the founder and force behind Boston-based label Cow Island Music. The label releases the kind of music that has it roots in an earlier era but music that is in much need today. It is honest, down-to-earth country and American music. Bill answered these questions for us about running

a traditional independent label in a era of digital downloads.

#### Your masthead says "country, rockabilly, honky tonk, western, swing, americana and all stops along the way" which sums up the label's intentions but when and how did you get into that music?

My musical roots date back to the early 1970's growing up just outside of Boston. Through one of my friend's older brother and his friends we were introduced to blues music. At that time, all the original guys we're rolling through Boston and Cambridge on a regular basis. Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Willie Dixon, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells, Hound Dog Taylor and on and on. We saw them all. Initially, we weren't even old enough to get into the clubs but the doormen were cool, they would look the other way.

From the blues I went on to punk for a bit but always leaned toward the rootsy bands like X, the Blasters, Los Lobos and Rank and File. There were Texas bands (the Tailgators, the Leroi Bros), more California bands (the Paladins, Forbidden Pigs) and then along came Dwight Yoakum and eventually Big Sandy and the Fly-Rite Boys and the Dave & Deke Combo who opened my eyes to Western Swing and Hillbilly Bop.All the while I was digging back to the original artists who had influenced these bands.

#### How do you decide which artists and bands to work with?

There are a number of factors that I consider but in the end I defer to my ears. Is this music that I want to keep listening to? Does it sound better with each listening? Does the singer have a good voice? Is the songwriting good? I look for the basic elements of good music which will stand the test of time.

## In these times how tough is it for a small independent label to survive and is there a particular reason for that?

Running this label is really my second career. I spent 25 years in a totally unrelated business so I've got perhaps a different perspective on this than someone who's been in the music business for a long time. I feel like I dove in at the very end of the physical era and the very beginning of the digital age.

I think it's extremely difficult to make a small label work. However, I think it's probably even more difficult to make a major label work. Low overhead is the name of the game.

This is really a result of the sea change that's going on in the music and entertainment industries. I hate to admit it but it's pretty apparent to me that the economic value of music has been greatly diminished and I don't blame it at all on illegal downloading. I think young people growing up today view music very differently than the vinyl generation did. Music is just one of many stimuli that they are bombarded with on a daily basis.

That being said, with the kind of music we release, the audience tends to be a little older and still wants to have that physical experience of owning the record and associated packaging/liner notes, etc. Until the mechanics of collecting money for the right to download music are sorted out, it feels like we're in a bit of a limbo.

#### Which of the albums that you have released has been the most successful?

All of the Starline Rhythm Boys records have done well. They have a huge following in their home state of Vermont where they play over 100 shows a year and they've got a strong international following as well. Arty Hill's *Bar of Gold* has done very well as has the Dixons' debut, *Still Your Fool.* 

Each new release seems to do better than the last one. The label itself has received a lot of attention and people are really supportive in helping to spread the word on what we're doing.

## How big a part is downloading in your overall sales or are your audiences more into physical product and in that light how important is the look of the album?

Downloads are a significant and growing piece of the overall income from each release. We generate a lot of digital sales from Europe. It was interesting when we released Preacher Jack's *Pictures From Life's Other Side*, the download activity in the first few months was really strong and it came from many different countries.

I put a lot of emphasis on the cover of the CD. With online shopping, most people will never see the package until they've purchased it so I think the image that's out there in the world needs to be strong.

#### Does releasing music in a particular genre help to focus on a particular audience?

The short answer is yes. You need to find your audience and you need to find them fast. We consciously stayed very tight genre-wise to build up a trust among our audience. Now we're starting to branch out a bit. With Li'l Mo and the Monicats pending release, *On The Moon*, we're venturing into different forms of American Music. That has always been the plan; it just needed to be the right time and the right artist.

## Where does the future of real country music lie, as a lot of artists who played country music have moved on to other forms?

There will always be an audience for real country music. The size of that audience will ebb and flow as a result of how the music is presented to the public in various forms of entertainment. A good country song speaks in a universal language.

## You're just about to release a new Monica Passin CD and you've been in touch for a couple of years, does it take time to put a deal in place?

It depends. Quite often, a band will have a CD that's pretty much ready to go and they're chomping at the bit to get it out. These can happen pretty quickly.

In the case of Monica, we had a very long courtship! She had self-released two prior recordings so she certainly had the ability to release *On The Moon* as well. We worked through a lot of discussion and in the end, she saw the benefit of being a part of Cow Island.

#### What upcoming plans do you have for Cow Island?

We're basically looking to continue to build upon the success we've achieved. The original plan was to release five recordings per year for five years and that's what we aim to do. The challenge



is to find new artists that fit in stylistically and can produce music of a quality equal to our current artists. It's a talented crowd, so if a band wants to join the "Cow Island Cavalcade of Stars" they've got to be capable of delivering the goods.

#### Is being from Boston based rather than, say Austin, a positive thing?

I don't know that it's really a positive thing. In some respects I'd say it's a negative in that a lot of the bands that play our kind of music just don't make it up to Boston. They'll turn around after they play New York if they even make it that far. However, proximity to New York is a good thing. I love the city and now that we've got two bands down there it's a good excuse to visit and there are always interesting bands emerging from New York.

I was in Austin for the NotSXSW festival recently and I must say it made me think. It was the first time I was there during the week of SXSW and we had a great time. A lot of the music I really enjoyed was by the Austin bands so it definitely has my attention. After enjoying the 80 degree weather, returning to Boston and temperatures in the 20's was not so nice.

Is there any particular artist past or present who you would like to work? Now that's a secret.



IFT MERRITT SHOULD NEED NO INTRODUCTION T LONESOME HIGHWAY READERS, SHE IS A WARM AND OPEN PERSON WHOSE WORK SPEAKS FOR ITSELF, BOTH LIVE AND ON RECORD.



#### What's happening in Tift Merritt's world?

I've been touring pretty constantly. I took one month off and I went to France to do some writing. Then I'm getting married when this tour's over.

## You're were obviously writing towards the next album, when do you hope to start that?

I hope to do it in the fall. But then I'm very superstitious about counting on anything.

#### How are things working out at Fantasy?

I'm really so lucky right now, I love being on Fantasy and I love the people that I work with. When you've been doing this for a while you can really figure out what's important to you, and we really met up with some great folks. They want to bring out the songs we want and I'm really fortunate that way. I don't have an umbrella to put the new songs under yet but I'll know before I go into the studio, I promise (*laughs*).

#### Have you thought about producers yet?

You know I really haven't. I just can't totally tell where the songs are going yet. I don't feel that I need to make some radical move, I just think that the songs are going to dictate where they're going. It'll be another singer/songwriter record. It won't be a reggae album! *(laughs)*.

**But you're not ruling anything out?** No, it's too early to rule anything out.

#### How was the writing trip to France?

It was great, it was very fast. When you've been deprived of aspects of normal life, as you are when you're on the road, I can get it in France where normal daily life is so lovely, just things like going to the market to get bread, you feel you've walked into heaven. I stayed in a new apartment as I felt I needed to have new ground. I did a lot of writing and I'd sit in different parts of the city. It all worked out and I was really happy. I made this *Buckingham* solo record too. I did a concert there and it's going to come out.

#### You're solo on this tour with Teddy Thompson?

It's just me and the guitar and piano. I enjoy the aspect of playing solo especially when I'm writing. You don't get to get away with anything when your stripped down, playing solo, and I think that's a good place to be when your writing. There are things you can't do when your solo, like *Tambourine*, some of the rocked-out soulful things that we can go crazy on as a band don't work solo. We've had such a good time on this tour. Sometimes being on the road can work against you though because you're in a bubble. You don't have time to go to a record store, unless you pointed to a cool store by someone local, but at the same time you're with a lot of musicians who will turn you on to something good, But it's definitely a dangerous bubble.

## His country album has been described as career suicide, not least by Teddy...

Don't get me started on that! It drives me crazy how everyone is pigeonholed and labelled. It's such a funny thing to be on tour for a year I get this need to control my environment. Whether it's the lighting or the food that I eat. The way you would when you're at home. When you come to a town you're only seeing the superficial part of everything and you feel that we live in this vapid, commercial world. That it's just all bright lights and neon and that we're all constantly being sold something. Are you a fan of Michael Pollan, he's written a book called In Defense Of Food, he's an organic advocate. He says that at the grocery you should always buy the things to eat from the fringes. Things that don't have the budget for advertising or packaging, like apples or bananas. I'm feeling the same way about the music that we play (laughs). It's so funny how record companies, or commercialism in general has to put a label on what you do. Putting packaging on you even if it doesn't make any sense. The main support for artists is on the side of big business and that just crushes so much. You know I love people like Buddy Miller and Emmylou, there are so many good musicians living in Nashville. I was really young in my career when I was on a Nashville label and it's very hard to distinguish what the paradigm is there.

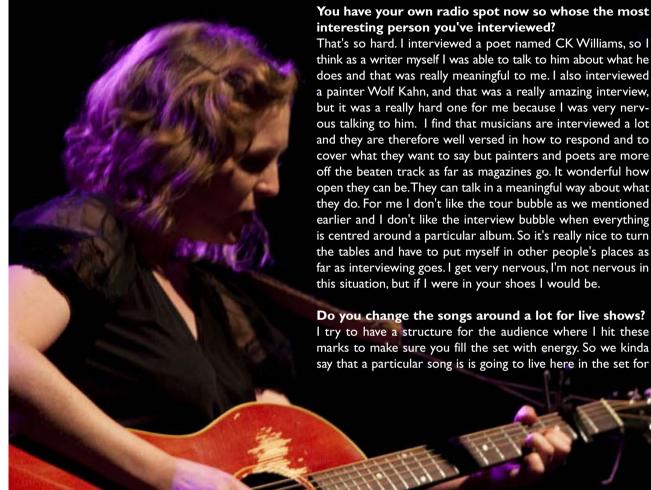
You don't like to ever limit what an artist can do but, at the same time, there is a disappointment if an artist you love for playing a certain genre moves away from that. Or artists who make a strong statement in a genre but find releasing it difficult. Jamey Johnson made good strong country album, it was a finished piece that he took to Nashville where Luke Lewis at Mercury was the one person who would put it out as it was. Well, that's great though Luke Lewis dropped me.

Do you think that, among musicians there a new mood with Barack Obama getting elected? Yes. In fact I sang for him. I got to meet him too. Just before

the election he did a series of rallies and one was in North Carolina. I got a call that asked me to sing the National Anthem and I said "Of course". So they vetted me and interviewed me and they called me back very quickly, so I guess I passed. I got a plane the next day and went to the rally but it was the day his grandmother died and he was really late, it was pouring rain, there was about 30,000 waiting and I was in this little tent with the secret service and I noticed he had Gatorade and a banana. Then the rain let up and the motorcade came and when everyone saw it there was a lot of screaming and people crying and he walked down the steps all by himself. He was the most relaxed self-possessed person I've ever seen. I didn't think that I'd get to meet him but the person who brought me tapped me on the shoulder and took me to meet him. There were about ten of us in a line and he came along, he was quick but so great and I said "Mr. Obama", because he hadn't been elected yet, "thank you so much for what you're doing" and he said "well thank you for singing tonight" and he said "why don't we get a picture". So someone took it and it was sent to me and I'd been thinking what did I do, did he touch me. I couldn't remember. I got the picture back and I was holding him (laughs). I stayed in the States then to vote then I went to France the next day. It was really fun to be part of all that. It was amazing.

## Then looking back from the perspective of another country and culture must have been interesting?

It was wonderful. It was so great to see the enthusiasm there for the United States and President Obama. The last time I'd been there was the "freedom fries" time and I'd just been nominated for the Country Grammy and I was thinking I don't know what's going to happen. There was the whole Dixie Chicks thing too. So it was nice to see how that all recovered. So many artists and ordinary people volunteered to help and I've never seen that before. I was sad not to have been home for the first month of his presidency. Everything you read seems to indicate that there is still a lot of partisan struggle in the States. I hope this recession picks up. It's scary and I'm so glad to be working.



#### You have your own radio spot now so whose the most interesting person you've interviewed?

That's so hard. I interviewed a poet named CK Williams, so I think as a writer myself I was able to talk to him about what he does and that was really meaningful to me. I also interviewed a painter Wolf Kahn, and that was a really amazing interview, but it was a really hard one for me because I was very nervous talking to him. I find that musicians are interviewed a lot and they are therefore well versed in how to respond and to cover what they want to say but painters and poets are more off the beaten track as far as magazines go. It wonderful how open they can be. They can talk in a meaningful way about what they do. For me I don't like the tour bubble as we mentioned earlier and I don't like the interview bubble when everything is centred around a particular album. So it's really nice to turn the tables and have to put myself in other people's places as far as interviewing goes. I get very nervous, I'm not nervous in this situation, but if I were in your shoes I would be.

Do you change the songs around a lot for live shows? I try to have a structure for the audience where I hit these marks to make sure you fill the set with energy. So we kinda now. We'd play a number of show were Good Hearted Man won't be in the set.

#### What about between song patter?

I never plan that. If there's a story about a song I'd maybe tell that, but I don't like to repeat jokes. I don't like myself when I get to a part of a tour when I'm not bring a fresh energy to it. That means it's time to go home. I try to tell myself that my job is like any other so I don't feel so strange. I try to get better at touring. I try to know what to expect and then to try to think about what might be bringing me down and to change that. I'm getting better at it. There's a point sometimes where you can't handle it.

#### How do you feel about co-writing?

People have said to me "you're a good writer but you should co-write", but it's just not what I'm doing. There are some artists who I love and are great people, people like Gary Louris, Patty Griffin and Teddy (Thompson). It would be wonderful to sit around and have some beer and see what happened. But I also think that writing is so different from travelling and being onstage that I don't really have enough time by myself to do what I need to do that I don't really want to share that time, so I find I'm really selfish with it. Writing would have to happen naturally with some of those people that I'm friends with if it was to happen.

#### How's New York?

I love living in New York because I think anything goes when you're living there. You're encouraged as an artist to be as crazy as you want. It's a wonderful feeling. Steve Earle is my neighbour. I ran into Alison (Moorer) walking down the street one day and she took me to lunch. I don't really know him very well. We'll I don't really live in New York, Zeke lives in New York, I'm on the road all the time (laughs). We're in Manhattan, in the West Village.

Tift, one of the nicest people we have met, married Zeke in March in New York. We wish them both a happy future together.

> Interview by Stephen Rapid Photography by Ronnie Norton

## AMY LA VERE

AMY LAVERE WAS BORN IN A SMALL TEXAS/LOUISIANA BORDER TOWN BUT AFTER MOVING ABOUT THE COUNTRY SHE ULTIMATELY MOVED TO DETROIT WHERE, IN HER TEENS, SHE FRONTED THE PUNK BAND LAST MINUTE. IN THE EARLY '90S AMY MOVED TO NASHVILLE AS PART OF THE RE-EMERGING LOWER BROADWAY SCENE, THERE SHE BEGAN TO PLAY UPRIGHT BASS AS HALF OF THE POPULAR ROOTS DUO THE GABE & AMY SHOW. BY 1999, SHE HAD AGAIN MOVED, THIS TIME TO MEMPHIS WHERE SHE INVOLVED HERSELF WITH THE LOCAL MUSIC COMMUNITY. IN EARLY 2005, AMY RELEASED HER DEBUT ALBUM THIS WORLD IS NOT MY HOME THROUGH ARCHER RECORDS.

LAVERE APPEARED IN A CAMEO ROLE AS ROCKABILLY QUEEN WANDA JACKSON IN WALK THE LINE AND THEN FOLLOWED UP WITH FEATURED ROLE IN CRAIG BREWER'S BLACK SNAKE MOAN.

AMY WENT BACK INTO THE STUDIO TO RECORD WITH ACCLAIMED PRODUCER, JIM DICKINSON THE RESULT WAS HER SECOND ALBUM, ANCHORS & ANVILS RELEASED IN 2007. AMY LAVERE HAS JUST RELEASED AN NEW FIVE TRACK E.P. DIED OF LOVE.

### Firstly why did you end up picking on a instrument that is bigger than you are?

Prior to picking up the upright I played guitar like anybody else, just playing chords, but I was never that accomplished. I was using it as a writing tool. I moved to Nashville briefly, for a job opportunity not for the music as I never had too much interest in country music at the time. But I moved into a house where a lot of musicians were staying and there were two upright players living there. I'd seen them playing but I didn't have any idea that the slap technique was supposed to be difficult but I seemed to have a natural ability and both guys said "you gotta learn to play". I really took to it. It was one note at a time and with the background I had I used the rudimentary knowledge to translate it to the upright.

#### You began playing then down in Lower Broadway...

Yeah, I did. At the time one of the upright players was Gabe Kudela, who I ended up eloping with briefly, he was playing with Th' Legendary Shack Shakers and he also fronted his own band called the Connoisseur Rats. I started sitting in with them and that's where I started to cut my teeth on the upright. But it's such a physical instrument I could only get through two or three songs before I was worn out. I didn't have the physical make up to hold the bass. I took a lot longer to build up the strength to do that. It was about six months after that that I moved to Memphis.

#### Did you start playing straight away in Memphis?

Gabe moved to Memphis with me and we started a band called the Gabe and Amy Show which was our own little take on punk rock country music. We did a lot of Replacements covers, Leonard Cohen covers and a lot of old classic country songs. We didn't have many originals.

#### How long did that last?

Well Gabe and I eventually separated and divorced. After that I formed a band called Amy and the Tramps.

Did that experience provide you with some songs? A whole record (laughs).

You recorded your first album in Memphis with Paul Taylor producing, where you happy with that? I have been performing in bands since I was fourteen, performing live, over half my life at this point, and the first band was a high-energy teen angst art-rock project but when I took that in to the studio I couldn't make it come alive. So in the end it was more the pretty ones that I was allowing to be used. Eventually we recorded a bunch of songs, nine which ended up on the first album. I kept kicking off the songs that were supposed to be rockers as they just sounded flat to me. But in retrospect I think that was just my ears. Now I wish that I had kept some of them as what happened was me but a much narrower version of me.

> On the second album you had the legendary Jim Dickenson produce, he had played on the first album already, is that something you would like to see happen again? I will work with Jim again. I was really pleased with the end result, By the time we had finished working on the album I felt that we had just got a rhythm going. A place where I had got brave enough to really start to speak about my ideas and feel encouraged so I would like the opportunity to bring that forward and make another record. I'm interested to see what another producer might bring but even so the producer thing is pretty mysterious to me. I

don't know how I'd feel about someone bringing material to me, or things like that. Things that you hear that producers sometimes do. With Jim its kind of don't try and fix what's not broken. Steve (Selvidge - her current guitar player) wasn't on the albums he just joined the band after Anchors and Anvils. Steve and Paul (Taylor - her drummer) both grew up playing with Jim and Jim's boys. So I think that for the three of us to make a record with Jim would be really great, because of everyone's history with him.

#### When will you start with that?

We're going to take January and February off to work on it. January to woodshed the record more and February to record, something I didn't do with either of the other albums. That was more about working up new material in the studio. This time I want to try them out live and spend time working them up and get a better idea of how we'd like to present them, so that the record become a little more representative of the live show. I had gone with my whim on choosing this instrument and that instrument on the last album so this time I want them to blend. We haven't been performing any of the new material onstage yet for that reason.

#### Do you write when you are travelling?

You know I write constantly. I write on the guitar mostly. I end up with note books of scraps from the road. I might here a line here, you know just eavesdropping on conversations. I get a lot of ideas on the road. But as far as completing a song that always happens when I sit down at my house.

### So do you use a lyric as a starting point?

Mostly. I seem to be having more luck that way. I also have a handful of musical ideas that I haven't been able to get lyrics on top of yet so it's been working better the other way round lately.

### How is life on the road for you now?

Well it has sort of plateaued for me and the guarantees are getting a little better for me so it seems that we're pretty much where we were at the moment. Treading water basically. But I love the lifestyle so much that you can't put a price on the experiences that we have. This is really what I want to do, so even trading water is success to me.

People seem more willing top go out a see live music here in Europe, that's not true for everywhere in the States. The States is such a huge place and in certain cities we do really, really well whereas we couldn't get people to come out in other cities even if we played naked (laughs). We played all kinds of venues over there for instance in San Francisco we can play a 600 seater theatre while in Nashville it might be 300. In other towns we can't get 20 people. In some towns we play in little coffee shops when we try to get into new markets. We've looped around the States now about three times over two years. We're at the level where we are still building our grassroots following. I'm not on a major label so I don't have that back-up. But I'm on such a sweet-hearted label that I wouldn't trade it. It may as well be a mom and pop label as they love music and are very good to us.

#### Do you think that downloading is a good option?

I do do it and I'm such a music consumer that I pass no judgement on it. I just assume that it's going to sort itself out. For my purposes I think the physical CD's are great. I just want to continue touring and playing I want to feel that people were still going to want to come out and see you play so how people get their music I don't put a lot of energy into worrying about that. I just worry that they're going to come out to the damn shows. I'm a vinyl fan too so I keep hoping that the label will do vinyl too.

I'm not a fan, in the least, of mainstream country as it seems that they will grab a hold of anything and make something shit out of it. so I get very distraught when people call that music country as I'm afraid that that is what they think of when the think of country but it's not what I think of. I think of Hank Williams Snr., Patsy Cline and Willie Nelson. That's the country that I love to listen to. When I was living in Nashville and playing down in The Bluegrass Inn I used to go and dance to Brazilbilly. I loved them.

When I got my upright bass it was from Dave Roe who played with Johnny Cash and you think this guys have made money but when we spend Thanksgiving with him he has this very modest home and he's playing some night for \$25 a man down on Broadway. The thing is the musicians who play there just really love music.

Painting with a big brush I would say that there are a lot of Americans who feel disjointed from their government. It feels like we're in the dark and we feel frustrated. I'm hopeful now that some change will come. We never held our tongue about what we felt about George Bush. That Dixie Chicks controversy was the strangest thing. That was a completely manufactured thing that a section of the media created and made into a big deal. What she said was a flippant remark rather than a big stand. She wasn't giving a speech about it or anything. I'm kinda the same, I feel that I have some truth serum constantly pumping in my veins that makes me say things I feel much to my own demise.

Have you met Justin Townes Earle? We had the privilege of do some dates with him and I'm such a big fan of his. He's amazing. We were disappointed with the record as it wasn't more representative of what he did live. It's a good record but I don't think it comes close to touching his live show. Which is close to a kind of Slim Pickins take on classic country.

#### You played Wanda Jackson in Walk The Line

Well barely. There was a little part there for me but it got cut out sadly. I did have lines with Reese Witherspoon and I sang the duet with Waylon Patton who played Jerry Lee Lewis and as my first record was coming out just before the film we really wanted to know what had made the film but they had said that I was still in it in the duet but that my speaking part wasn't but the duet never made the final edit.

#### Are you interesting in further acting roles?

Man, I am really interested but I don't have the time. I don't have an agent and I have a lot of respect for the art of acting as I've spent my whole life honing my craft as a musician and as acting is a craft all unto itself you would need to devote time to it. I do feel that I have some natural ability at it though. But it would hardly be fair to jump in without putting the time in though I have just finished another project for MTV that's called \$5 Cover an online mini-series about the \$5 cover crowd, the kids that go out six nights a week to see live music and there nearly always a \$5 cover charge. Its

about this culture in Memphis. All the actors in it are Memphis musicians. Ben from Lucero is a lead character, I have a lead, Harlan T BoBo, an artist I love is in it. It's going to launch in March on MTV's website. I play myself but it's not me, some of it is improv and some of it's scripted.

> Interview by Stephen Rapid Photography by Ronnie Norton

"HUSTLE & FLOW"

## 

#### Chris Stuart & Backcountry Crooked Man

A solid bluegrass five-piece who play self-written songs, mostly by Chris Stuart himself, but with two from co-lead vocalist lanet Beazley and one from fiddle player Christian Ward. The songs, such as Beazley's murder song Lantern Bay Inn, could easily be done in hard country mode as well as the acoustic setting here. The songs are thoughtful and evocative, I Remember Memphis, tells of a early love from that illustrious town. Stuart and the band have a half-dozen albums under their belts with varying line-ups but here they seem to have found a comfortable niche with the addition of two younger players in Austin and Christian Ward. The balance of enthusiasm, expertise and experience has produce an album of strong songs and sure-footed playing. The vocals are delivered with conviction and the harmonies enhance the songs. They use drummer Roger Gillespie on two tracks for added drive, while the instrumental Silverton shows their skill at delivering a song without the need for vocal enhancement. However it is the overall package of song. vocals and playing where the best hit home. Ofer And Yesbuddy is a soft, gentle but very human story of companionship and time passing that will have universal appeal for any audience. The closing I See God Coming Down The Road is a gospel song sung with conviction and restraint. This thirteen track album will please bluegrass fans but the songs will also attract those of a less committed nature, those who will be drawn to the song/stories that are the stock in trade for Chris Stuart and Backcountry. www.chrisstuart.com

#### Megan Munroe One More Broken String Diamond Music Group

This 25 year old singer songwriter has just released her latest album that is a mix of contemporary country as well as some pop overtones. Growing up she listened to a range of music from Vince Gill and Glen Campbell to Jewel and Pearl Jam. In other words she has absorbed a lot of influences to arrive at her particular sense of place. She has cowritten all the songs here with her usual partner Brian Oaks, other than one self-written song Belle Meade. She has a distinctive voice that delivers these songs of young love. a mix of heartache and heart song. Leavin' Memphis tells of a partner slipping away during the night and the determination that the protagonist might be leaving Memphis and everything that was there but he sure as hell "ain't leaving me". This sets Monroe up as a determined and spirited personality, something that is reflected in how she writes and delivers her songs. Monroe sounds like she should be a shoe-in at country radio and the album is the equal of a lot of what Music Row is currently releasing. Producer Doug Deforest adds enough mandolin, fiddle and steel to make it country but not enough to call it a traditional album, it is what it is. Megan Munroe has the voice, songs and good looks to make it to the majors and on such songs as Shameless Fool shows she shows her strengths and virtues and that she has a future ahead of her whatever way she chooses to take her music

#### Heybale The Last Cowboy Album Self-released

The latest album from the Austin based five piece is unadulterated country dance music from a team of seasoned professionals who have an obvious love for the music they make. They have been together for over eight years and now include; on piano and lead vocals Earl Poole Ball, who worked for many years with Johnny Cash, Redd Volkaert has played guitar with Merle Haggard amongst many others, while bassist Kevin Smith played here in Ireland with Dwight Yoakam and drummer Tom Lewis was a member of the Wagoneers and played with lunior Brown, Relative newcomer is vocalist Gary Claxton but he's no slouch either in this company. Add to this such friends as Elana lames. Cindy Cashdollar, Casper Rawls and Tommy Detmore and you have a mighty fine line-up. The songs are a mix of well chosen classics and original songs such as the Claxton/Volkaert co-write California Wine, Ball's Livin' In A Cheap Motel or Claxton's House Of Secrets. The covers include Willie Nelson's Mr. Record Man and Tom T Hall's oft recorded That's How I Got To Memphis. Their version holds it's own without making you forget the original or Buddy Miller's vibrant interpretation. There is a foot tapping mix of styles here from honky tonk to swing all delivered with heart and soul in the mode of a hard country review with the rotation of the three lead vocalists and the on target playing. For above all these are men in love with their music and not doing just for financial rewards or other reason. Not that these guys don't have to make a living; all professional musicians need to do that to survive but the motivation here is the music and it shows. They have a previous live CD Continental Live as well as a live in-studio radio broadcast Live From 1-A which features some more classic songs including Mental Revenge, Crazy Arms and Chuck Berry's Promised Land all delivered with spirit and if the sound isn't as good as The last Cowboy Album it's still a whole lot of fun. If you love good country music then check them out at their site www.heybale.com, tell them Lonesome Highway sent you.

#### Waylon Jennings Live from Austin Texas '84 New West

With new series packaging and an new CD/DVD format New West have released their second Jennings set taken from the Austin City Limits long running TV show. The previous show was from April 1989 and has a couple of numbers in common with the current release. Likewise his band has some common players on both sets. Steel player Ralph Mooney who helped define the sound being the most crucial but it is Jenning's phased Telecaster and distinctive voice and delivery that makes him unique. The set opens with his take on Neil Young's Are You Ready For The Country? and indeed we are. He also does his favourite Willie song It's Not Supposed To Be This Way and his questioning of the marketing of himself and his buddies on Don't You Think This Outlaw Bit's Done Got Out Of Hand. Add to that Rodney Crowell's I Ain't Living Long Like This and Billy Joe Shaver's Honky Tonk Heroes and you have a set of timeless songs performed by a man and band at the top of their songs he has recorded and it shows his more tender and reflective side. Waylon fans will love it and for newcomers it serves as a excellent primer of a country legend in sound and vision.

#### Merle Haggard Live from Austin Texas '78 New West

Another in the CD/DVD series this Haggard set is an earlier on than the previous release which was taken from an October 1985 Austin City Limits Show, Both shows feature Silver Wings but that's the only song common to both sets. On this one you get some classic Haggard songs such as Ramblin' Fever, Sing Me Back Home and Workin' Man Blues. There are staple players in his band including guitarists Roy Nichols and Norman Hamlet and drummer Biff Adams. You never tire of hearing Haggard, especially at this period of his career. His is another country icon who well deserves his status and one who is often overlooked these days. He is a monumental singer and songwriter but has included a fair proportion of outside songs in his set. Here there's Cindy Walker's Cherokee Maiden, a couple associated with his hero Bob Wills - San Antonio Rose and Misery as well as a uptempo, up all round version of Orange Blossom Special with Haggard on fiddle, which they give a strange eastern twist at one point. The band are in fine form and given the chance to shine on several occasions, as is Haggard who obviously enjoys the show and shows yet again what an accomplished and emotive vocalist he is. A highlight of the set is the restrained, remorseful Long Black Limousine. Both sets are also available as DVD only versions as well.

#### I Draw Slow Downside Self-Release

This quintet play roots orientated acoustic music that built around the vocals and songs of siblings Louise and Dave Holden. There are elements of traditional folk and string band music at the core of their sound. The two songs not written by the pair, both traditional

arrangements are *Bowling Green* and *Little Satchel* and both come of as strong, individual version that stand up well against the many versions of the songs out there. There seem to have been something of an explosion of bands playing acoustic roots music these days. Not least of these is Prison Love who have built up a considerable local following and have themselves released a fine recent album. Nor can you forget the contribution made by the Rough Deal Stringband to the genre with the authentic take on old time string band sounds. I Draw Slow have a vocal, guitar, banjo, fiddle and double bass line-up that allows the songs to shine. Songs like *Santiago* or *Dead In The Morning* show the ongoing potential that the pair have as writers and sings. The latter contrasts the two voices both as on their own and in harmony. The opening *Little Switzerland* has a bright melody that makes it a strong opener. I Draw Slow play low-key music perfectly suited to small intimate venues and have made a debut album that is a pretty fair summation of their collective and individual talents that should gain them a greater appreciation of what they are about and the potential that the future holds for them.

#### Randy Houser Anything Goes Universal South

This is a robust mix of ballads and more rockin' slices of contemporary country music. Houser has co-written several of these songs and they're often full of big choruses on a selection of expected themes. Kickin' back after a days work, kickin' up over a bust-up and keeping faith. The production is aimed at radio and upfront rhythms that suit it's target audience. A couple of songs that Houser has recorded here from outside work well. Chuck Jones and Chuck Cannon's *Strange* focus on being a little off-beat while the restrained Jon Randall, Al Anderson song *How Many Times?* is a well written song of reflecting on how having a good time can have a consequence at home. It features Vince Gill's fine background vocals and is a soulful slice of sad but slightly too late sincerity and has some elegant playing from the assembled A-team players, as you would expect from Music Row. That reflection on life and loves is continued on the final track, *I'll Sleep*. Overall the album shows Houser as a good ol' boy with a strong voice and as good a chance to make it as any of his contemporaries.

#### Straw Dogs Love and Then Hope Crafty

This is another well-crafted recording with songs that broaden outs their base. The Americana roots are still there with banjo and pedal steel blending with the cello on different tracks to produce a uniform direction. Dave von Beck is the songwriter for all 14 songs and is given strong vocal and harmony support from Darren Smith (who released his own fine solo album *Last Drive* a couple of years ago). The songs have a good sense of melody and good chorus. *Serious Love* uses a female voice to contrast and blend with the lead vocal to good effect. *Rather Be* again highlights the strong harmony between the bands two vocalists on this memorable acoustic song. Straw Dogs also know how to pick up the tempo as they do on *Fallow* where the pedal steel adds a plaintive tone to the song's quest for explanation. Another strong song is *Then Maria*, it looks at a relationship that can easily be moved from love and hope to chaos and pain. The album ends with *First Time* about the parting of the ways after a hard won understanding that the time to move on is overdue. Straw Dogs have made another album that reaffirms their core strengths and continued development as a band. www.craftyrecords.com

#### Kevin Costner & Modern West Untold Truths Republic

A better album than some reviews have suggested. Not least due to the involvement of co-producers Teddy Morgan and John Coinman. Both of whom have made very good albums in their own right. Maybe Costner not as "cool" as he once was and that this is being seen as something of a vanity project, add to that that it often recalls Springsteen and Mellencamp bodies of work and you can see why the knives may be out. Given that Costner is a credible lead vocalist and the songs stand up (try *Down In Nogales, 5 Minutes From America* and *Leland lowa*), as does the band and you have an album that if came from a totally unknown band would be well received in a low-key way. No barriers are broken here but then that wasn't the intention rather it's a case of getting out there a delivering the kind of music they wanted to play. Costner has co-written a half dozen of the songs but it is the two experienced writers Morgan and Coinman who are the key writers. If this project could lead people to their own albums. Kevin Costner is clearly enjoying this and if you relax into it and see it for what it set out to be then there's a good chance that you will too.

Blackie and The Rodeo Kings Swinging From The Chains Of Love True North This trio are a delight and all their albums are worth hearing, if you can come across them, which makes this career overview all the more welcome. A fourteen track compilation that highlights their joint skills as well as their individual talents. Formed in 1996 to record a tribute album to singer/songwriter Willie P. Bennett (who played here with Fred Eaglesmith and who recently passed away) they found the chemistry to be positive and have continued to record and tour between solo albums. The trio are TomWilson, Stephen Fearing and Colin Linden. The latter is also the band's producer. The songs are a mix of co-writes between the members (and others) and outside covers from the likes of Fred Eaglesmith, Willie P. Bennett and Johnny Cash. The latter's *Folsom Prison Blues* is taken from a Cash tribute compilation and given a reading that takes brings latter part of the song's title to the fore. It fits easily into their roots, bluesy style. All three have strong voices that work either together giving the album plenty of variety. Linden is also a top-notch guitarist and his evocative slide playing is featured. They can also play songs like the sensitive *Vale Of Tears*. The majority of these songs run past the 3 minute mark and one over 5. The Rodeo Kings cover the rough and tumble that life brings and do it in a way that will have you returning for more.

#### The Dixons Still Your Fool Cow Island

Not to be confused with the Irish Dixons from many years ago they're rather a New York area band who play solid Bakersfield-styled country. Singer Jeff Mowrer is the songwriter here and his songs are classic country heartbreak tales bolstered by an uptempo beat. Think early Derailers back through to classic Buck Owens. Mowrer also co-produced the album with Tony Maimone, who, fact fans, was once a member of Pere Ubu. Recorded live in the studio it has a upfront and lively sound that suits the songs perfectly. There are three covers alongside Mowrer's originals. A cover of *Thanks A Lot* which fits well, Wayne Walker's *I've Got A Brand New Heartache* that they took from Ray Price and *Just Say You'll Be Mine* from a friend of Mowrer's, Eric Kinsey. The eleven songs are performed to a high standard with Gerald Menke's steel guitar and Chris Hartway's Telecaster well to the fore. This is the kind of classic country that Mowrer heard on his grandfather's radio when he was growing up. The Dixons offer you a good night out or (with the CD) a good night in and are, I'm sure, a very welcome addition to the gig scene around New York. www.cowislandmusic.com

#### Imelda May Love Tattoo Blue Thumb

Though the word rockabilly has often been used about Imelda May, Love Tattoo has a much broader base which helps to account for its wide appeal. There are elements of jazz, torch songs and blues as well as raw rock 'n' roll all together. But it's her voice that adds the distinction and her skill as a songwriter that backs it up. The majority of these songs are solo credits which means that May can only get better as time goes on. When you consider that she also produced the album she leaves a lot of her label and producer controlled contemporaries standing. She can move from the uptempo tempestuous title track Love Tattoo to the caress that follows on Meet You At The Moon. She is backed by her own band rather than throwing her in with a bunch of session guys. May has had some lucky breaks that have given her major TV exposure but doesn't discount from her obvious talents and the quality of music that this album delivers. Love Tattoo may well lead a wider audience to look a little deeper at Rockabilly and that is good thing, even if it may mean the music moves from being the domain of a select few who understand it as away of life as well as a musical force.

#### Colin Linden From The Water True North

This album plays special tribute to Linden's friend and fellow musician Richard Bell, who died in 2007, the keyboard player with whom he played on countless projects. Rather than being a melancholy affair it sets out to celebrate Bell's spirit. It's Linden's 11th solo release and perhaps his most soulful album to date. Soulful in several different ways, not least with the groove that gives his roots music an added sense of depth. One track cowritten by Linden and his wife Janice Powers is about Bell "tough like Chuvalo with a Ray Charles' soul". It has a funky underlay with some characteristically inventive playing from Linden. That groove continues with the song he co-wrote with Bell Trouble Only Comes In Threes. The mood changes on other tracks Mon Couer Est Dans Tes Mains which has a classic Peter Green Fleetwood Mac feel. Elsewhere New Orleans is a focal point, the title track written in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. While John Lennon In New Orleans takes on a viewpoint of a stranger in the city rather than detail an exact event. Later Than You Think is pretty much summed up by it's title, telling us to "get our house in order". The Price You Pay, one of two co-writes with Gary Nicholson, is a hefty slice of a dirty guitar groove. The more subtle Sinking Down Slow builds on a voice and guitar intro into a B3 styled reflection of loss. The album closes with the country blues declaration Good Will Always Remember Your Prayers, Colin Linden is a all round talent, a memorable singer and exceptional guitarist, a strong songwriter and a seasoned producer with over 70 production credits and *From The Water* draws from that deep well.

#### Taylor Swift Fearless Big Machine

That Taylor Swift has talent as a writer, singer and album co-producer is without question, that she has sold millions of albums is also a given but that she is a country singer... come on. This album has very little to do with country music, certainly as I would recognize it. She appeals to a demographic and a song like *Fifteen* is perfectly aimed at a young and fresh audience, but it is just pop music recorded in Nashville on a Nashville Label. There are credits for pedal steel but you'd be hard pressed to hear it here. There are occasional hints of mandolin, banjo and fiddle but that's about it. That Taylor Swift has found her audience is undoubted and that the album is going to appeal to her fans back home and will also appeal to a European fan base if it get the big push and the airplay it needs. However well it has been put together it is not aimed at the likes of me and given that we can both happily go our own ways.

#### Kimmie Rhodes Ten Summers Sunbird

This album is being re-promoted to coincide with Kimmie's Spring European tour. Originally released in 2005 it was titled to cover a period of 10 summers from 1995. It's a compilation of tracks that had appeared on previous albums. The opening song West Texas Heaven was the title track of a previous album. Maybe We'll Just Disappear with Waylon lennings and I'm Gonng Fly a duet with Townes Van Zandt also came from the West Texas Heaven album from 1994. However it still serves as a great starter for the music of Kimmie Rhodes, a distinctive singer and a fine songwriter. And it's always good to hear Townes and Waylon. The songs are a audio diary of ten years in her life, a time she seems to have thoroughly enjoyed and which led her to continue to make her music. Some of the friends she has made along the way include Emmylou Harris, Beth Neilsen Chapman and Willie Nelson and they all make appearances. Songs like Big Ol' Train are evocative in a gentle rolling way. Love Me Like A Song, a song co-written with Gary Nicholson, shows how her voice can harmonise and blend to create something special, as she also does here with Willie Nelson, Her soft, gentle voice is perfectly suited in tandem with Emmylou Harris on the song that they wrote together Love And Happiness For You. But it's not about the guest. If you don't already own this album then you should pick up a copy. This is music that has and will last and continues to give.

#### Chuck Mead Journeyman's Wager Grassy Knoll

The BR549 frontman steps out on his own for a collection of co-written songs that will be familiar to fans of the band whilst also being something of a departure from BR5's own recorded output. It may take a couple of listens to adjust to it's new sonic sensibilities but the end results speak for themselves. The album opens with the high-octane Natchez Trace, before moving on to the more sinister Gun Metal Gray, a song that intertwines guitar and resonator with harmonica and a sturdy beat. She Got The Ring has the kind of lived-in humour that was part and parcel of the BR5 oeuvre. It's a tale of a young lady looking for more than love and is a close cousin, in theme, to lerry Reed's She Got The Goldmine (I Got The Shaft) and uses a vibrant horn section to give the song a uplifting vibe on a downbeat tale. From then on Mead takes you on a journey, a take on love and life that is as much pub-rock and roots as it is hillbilly. These are all things that have been in Mead's genetic code for a long time. He has been working as a writer for the last year or so and has written with people like Tia Sellers, Bobby Huff and Patrick Davis among others which has undoubtedly helped him hone his craft. This in turn meant that many of the songs were co-written in advance of making the album. The intention to do something new has paid off and will give him a wider audience. Those who loved BR549 will find songs like Up On Edge Hill offering much to admire, it is a twang-laden joy. I Wish It Was Friday joins the ranks of perfectly judged odes to the escape that a weekend offers. The sole cover here is Mead's take on George Harrison's Old Brown Shoe, a song he has long admired and it's given a uptempo workout. The closing No Regrets is a statement of intent and attitude and closes out a varied and versatile album that highlights Mead's talents. While it may not hit the spot for everyone who was a BR549 fan in the past it will hit a whole new set of numbers.

#### Dawn Shipley And The Sharp Shooters Baby If I... El Toro

This LA based outfit play mostly uptempo twang-filled rockabilly, rock 'n' roll and hillbilly that exudes energy and fun. Backed by a tight trio, Shipley shoots from the hip on songs of love - lost, strayed and found. All are delivered with a mix of contemporary commitment and traditional style. The songs have a mix of the rawness of early rock 'n' roll and the smoothness of a Nashville cosmopolitan Cline-esque classiness. They have played all the major rockabilly festivals and clubs since forming in 2001 and *Baby If L..* is their latest alburn. It was released a couple of years back but has the kind of timeless quality that the best of this music has. Fun and good playing and singing never loses it's appeal. Shipley sings with passion and is an ideal front person for this style of band, all of whom so obviously love the music they play and record. www.dawnshipley.com

#### The Handsome Family Honey Moon Independent

Those who are already counted as devoted fans of the band's music will, doubtless, welcome this new selection of songs. With *Honey Moon* Rennie Sparks has focused her undoubted writing skills to her vision of romance and love. The songs were then recorded, as is usual, at home by husband Brett who uses his distinctive, baritone voice to give these songs life. The results are underplayed, largely irony-free slices of family life - from a family that plays together. Most of their music has a underlying playfulness that is, on occasion, at odds with the lyrical direction. A number of guests are added for effect on drums and guitars (classical and pedal steel). Rennie has added her voice to the proceedings more so than she usually does. She provides a counterpoint to Brett's well-deep voice. His playing is again subtle, low-key and effective. The music has a skewed country music core but one that filters that music at its most rural and primitive through a thoroughly contemporary prism of technology and human timbre that is alive with imagination and wonder at the vagaries that the simple things that can be found all around us. The Handsome Family have continued to gain fans with each album, and with every live performance. This new album will enhance that reputation and allow for even bigger family gatherings in the future.

#### Tanya Tucker The Ultimate Collection Humphead

When we give out about the way country has gone pop these days with an endless stream of young singers we should not forget that this has happened throughout the music's history. Back in 1972 a thirteen year old Tanya Tucker had a hit with *Delta Dawn* (a live version of the song is included here). After her initial success with Columbia Records she moved to MCA for a six year tenure from where this selection of tracks have been compiled. A generous 24 tracks cover the more cosmopolitan settings with strings through to the more traditional sounding tracks like *lt's A Cowboy Lovin' Night, Texas (When I Die)* or *Pecos Promenade*. There's a duet with her former partner in song (as well as tabloid tales) Glen Campbell on Bobby Darin's *Dream Lover*. Long time Tucker fans have everything here, but is is still a useful collection that would serve as a history lesson for those enamoured by today's young country starlets. Tucker, it must be noted, always had a strong, passionate and distinctive voice that was well able to handle the variety of material she was recording through a lone and successful career.

#### Headwater Lay You Down Nowhere Town

This quintet (though only four members are featured in the photograph) come from Canada and conjure up a fine racket. It's a rootsy blend of acoustic instruments and pedal steel (a welcome addition to the sound throughout) and Hammond B3 that has a lot of textures to fill out their self-written songs. The one outside track is a cover of Fred Eaglesmith's *Freight Train*. Vocals are handled by the duo of Jonas Shandel and Matt Bryant with other members and guests chipping in. Producer Marc L'Esperance also added drums to the mix and the end result is a lively and enjoyable set of songs that are varied in tempo and mood, from the energy of *Brown Stone Road* and *Freight Train* to the more reflective themes of *The Drifter or Under The Rocks And Stones*. Headwater are accomplished players and the collective voices are strong. The songs equally have the ability to lodge themselves in the collective consciousness in an undemanding way. These is not a set of song that screams for your attention rather they beckon you in and that as it should be. *Lay You Down* is an album for and of these times and better than many more high profile releases covering similar ground. www.headwater.ca

#### Otis Gibbs Grandpa Walked A Picket Line Wanamaker

Opening with the steel guitar driven *Caroline* this Chris Stamey produced album gets things off to a fine start. The title-track tells of political activism from ordinary people who in small ways helped to change things for the better for those that followed. It reveals Gibbs' rough-throated voice to good effect. The producer has assembled a stellar cast of players including Will Rigby on drums, Tim Easton on mandolin, harmonica and vocals as well as the indefatigable AI Perkins on steel and dobro. Gibbs reminds me of Blaze Foley to a degree in that songs like *Damn Me* and *Preacher Steve* have a similar rough edge of realism at their heart - tales of people and the paths they've chosen. While a more basic need for simple human companionship is at the core of the down to earth

realities of Ain't Nothing Special. But all these song are inhabited by Gibbs' voice both world weary and worn, but also knowing of the kindness of strangers and friends and the journeys ahead. The music is sometimes stripped down to guitar and voice, as with *Long Black Thunder*, or the guitar and steel focus of *Honey Please* with its memorable chorus while elsewhere he makes good use of the assembled players to deliver a still stark but rounded musical setting that makes this album a success on a number of levels. You can hear some of the songs from the album at Gibbs' website www.otisgibbs.com and you can also see some of Otis' fine photography.

#### Charlie Parr Roustabout Independent

This is stripped down earthy country, rural style blues from Charlie Parr who accompanies himself on a National steel-bodied guitar, or a 12 string and banjo. On the album he is joined by friends on guitar, fiddle, harmonica and an assortment of percussion. A sound that for many is new but one that is ageless. It is a part of the move by many musicians to a non-electric format that moves from the kitchen or sitting-room to the stage and onto CD. It seems to be part of a need to find something more real and less contrived that much of the music that the mainstream offers. Recorded in non-studio set-ups it is bare bones and direct - which is part of its charm. The songs are a mix of originals and traditional songs arranged by Parr. Some, like the dark tale of Midnight Has Come And Gone deliver a mood that makes it a highlight. Parr has a voice that fits the music he plays, one capable of different tones that match the instruments he plays, Roustabout is the latest album from Parr, who, with a certain amount of humour, describes himself as "One man, One guitar. One foot in the grave". This is music at it most basic, most human and elemental level but music that touches a nerve, even if it's a raw one. Roustabout suggest a life without roots but this take on the title has it roots firmly in a timeless tradition of the telling of folk tales, www.charlieparr.com/www.independentrecords.ie

#### Joshua Morrison Home Expanding Brooklyn

A tight playing unit surrounds Morrison's breathy vocal delivery with guitar, bass and drums on a set of his own songs that feel like a soft, warm summer day. It is easy to see that Morrison music could gain traction with a certain audience segment. There are no hard or rough edges to his music, yet there are an abundance of textures from tambourines, organ and strings added to the line up to give things a wider range of sounds. The central focus is Morrison's voice which is one of those that will either appeal straight away or have you heading for something with a harder edge. His acoustic based dream-pop is the antithesis of what he must have experienced as a soldier in Iraq. There are elements of singer/songwriters like Nick Drake here though he has a fully realised sound that that artist. It's early days and he has time to explore the edges of his music. The is a quality here that will possibly have a wide appeal though as an independent artist making a connection is that much harder: imorrisonmusic.com

#### Shooter Jennings Bad Magick (the best of) Universal South

One wonders if this is a good move or simply a good bye between Shooter and his label. After just 3 albums with the label comes this 15 track compilation which showcases lennings rough and ready rocked up take on southern rock and rebellious country. It is undoubtedly invigorating and welcome. Like other children of famous fathers (and mothers) Jennings is both respectful of the lineage and at the same time lining it up as a target to create his own contemporary vision and version of the music. The opening 4th Of July is a good fun song with a brief appearance from George Jones at the end. From there on such songs as Southern Comfort or The Wolf, are songs that detail a lifestyle and an attitude that is true to itself. This is further explored in It Ain't Easy a soulful tale of what money and fame can mean in the long term. Another side of that lifestyle and the ways chosen to help deal with it is outlined in Busted In Baylor County, a fairly self-explanatory song. There are two new unreleased songs added to the collection, a version of Hank Williams Ir's Living Proof and a live take on Lonesome Blues both showing that lennings and his band The 357's are a whole lot of fun and making some fine music. It may be too rough edged for mainstream radio, but if you like your country served with some hot sauce and seasoning. then Shooter Jennings will deliver. This compilation serves a fine primer for a certified talent, who is not all rowdy southern rock but also capable of insight and subtely. The version of Living Proof is a well chosen critique of his own position and highlights his vocal and interpretative skills. Here's to the next step whatever that might be.

#### Jason Arnold and The Stepsiders With Friends Like These Self-Release

This album is living proof of a solid country singer who loves what he does and the genre

he plays. There's nothing here that is outstanding or different, no barriers are broken but I doubt that is what Jason Arnold wanted to do. He wants to do is play honest-to-god country music with his band, a floating collective of Austin players. This is 12 tracks of solid heartbreak, break-up and misery - sure don't sound like much fun to outsiders but to believers this is what country is all about. Arnold has written or co-written all the songs here bar a version of Willie Nelson's *Mr Record Man*, Brian Burns' *Whiskey-O* and Curt Ryle's *Wild Turkey And 7-Up*. The players are all solid Austin country musicians and they play exactly as you would expect. Arnold is still out there, still playing and singing his heart out. He may never reach the heights but I don't think his intentions are to do anything other that to have people dance and enjoy his mix of his own songs and those of the artists that inspired him. On that level Jason Arnold is already there. www.stepsiders.com

#### Randy Travis The Ultimate Hits HumpHead

The latest in a line of Randy Travis greatest hits collections is this double CD album that spans Randy's career from his notable debut through to more recent releases. What's the clear focus here is that distinctive and delightful voice. When many started listening to country music in the 80's the starting point was such diverse artists as Dwight Yoakam, Steve Earle as well as Randy Travis, who all emerged on major labels around the same time. Time has revealed Travis to be an artist, not unlike George Strait, who has never veered far from the path he started out on. Consistent and reliable while never really pushing barriers or raising the excitement level too high, Travis has none-the-less produced a body of work that is a byword for solid honest country music. This album is a testament to his provess as a singer capable of delivering emotion and empathy, a vocal stylist who is up there with the best country artists of the last 50 years. With such career highlights as *Digging Up Bones* from his Storms Of Life debut through to *Turn It Around* from his 2008 album Around The Bend, this collection is ideal for those want an overview of his work for the first time, as well as for longtime fans who would like the hits in one place, they also get the bonus of two unreleased tracks.

#### Catherine Macellan Water In The Ground True North

Following from last years Church Bell Blues comes this new album which is again produced with James Phillips. Another of the emerging line of strong Canadian singer/songwriters who deliver their music in the setting of an electric band, she has a clear voice that gives life to her words of love, loss and being left behind. With such strong entries into her canon as Water In The Ground and Isabel's Song, wherein her voice stand proud above a simple, subdued backing of an electric guitar-led sound. The tracks all feature a subtle backing that uses the full band textures but never overwhelms. The vocals are always well to the fore and on Sorrows Drown she uses the second voice of Amelia Curran to good effect. The sense of loneliness and isolation is central to a song like Again From The Start which is again underplayed with the banjo motif underlining the songs quiet sense of distress. The album also comes packaged with an earlier release Dark Dream Midnight that follows a similar direction of subtle playing under Macellan's voice. The only constant in all three albums is Phillips the supporting players changing with each album. Dark Dream Midnight seems a little harsher than the following albums as Macellan has refined and grown into her sound. There is the poignant Family Names and the fog bound soundscape of February Song or the resolution of Packed My Bags that show her development to where she is now. Macellan is an artist who needs time to investigate will find much to admire. She doesn't have the profile of a Kathleen Edwards but may well appeal to the same fan base.

#### Israel Nash Gripka New York Town Self-Release

This album has been in heavy rotation on my CD player since I opened the package. These are literate abstract songs from a singer/songwriter who fits the tradition of the troubled troubadour. Travelling with the same roadmap as Bruce Springsteen or Ryan Adams and others but being his own man. Gripka, uses a used template of guitar bass, drums and organ/piano overlays with added touches of pedal steel to creates some magic of his own. He has a strong, weary-toned, but hopeful, voice and his songs tell of trial and tribulation, tales that are sometimes tall and, at others, intangible. But they're never less than touchable. Take *Bricks* as an example the short song lines that telegraph a need to be with someone but underline the difficulty in getting there. The music was produced by Jimi Zhivago, who is at the heart of these songs as key player, a multi-instrumentalist who has crafted the sound behind Gripka. Gripka comes across as on of those artists who could quite possibly find the same kind of favour on these shores as Josh Ritter, given the right exposure. He is a songwriter for the times, not quite the linear story songs of some of his contemporaries but rather more impressionistic works that conjure up a lingering complexity. *Pink Long-Stem Rose* is the kind of song that can easily lodge itself in the collective consciousness that comes when featured at the right time. Listen to tracks on his website www.israelgripka.com and enjoy.

#### Arty Hill & The Long Gone Daddies Back On The Rail Cow Island

This fine 2005 release, which was one of my favourites when it was originally released, is being made available again through WJ Hunt's Cow Island imprint and this version includes an additional bonus track. Lauded by Jason Ringenberg it also gets my vote. A solid straight down the line country album that is focused on Hill's heartfelt vocals and his classic country genre writing, with such strong songs as *I Left Highlantown, Based On Real Life, Back On The Rail.* These songs have a real sensitivity to living life as it is found and as it comes, while there are also songs of the highlight here is Hill's song *Tammerlane*, a love song that also encompasses a sense of loss, which has a strong chorus delivered over a sensitive acoustic and electric guitar backing. Which highlights all the albums strengths. Mention should also be made of the, then, Long Gone Daddies; Telecaster master Dave Chappell and drummer Craig Stevens, a trio quite capable giving a songs a good kick in the butt as well as playing it close to the (broken) heart. For fans of real country music.

#### Ryan Bingham & The Dead Horses Roadhouse Sun HumpHead

The second album from Bingham and his road band follows on from where the previous album left off with Bingham's aged, cracked vocal again front and centre. Again it has been produced by ex Black Crowes guitarist Marc Ford who brings some upfront Southern Rock overtones to the proceedings. The sound mixes that same soulful Southern rock with a Texas singer/songwriter sensibility and a touch of Faces abandon, with a pinch of blues, all of which makes for a potent sound that covers any number of bases. The songs run from the raucous truth of *Tell Mother 1 Miss Her So* to the relative restraint of the acoustic *Snake* Eyes. It is the sort of album that you need to spend time with to really get the most out of its gravel roads rock roots realism. Bingham has again written all the songs here but this time there's is no lyrics included in the package so you rely on mood and menace to follow the album's overall tone. The end result will not displease those who have encountered Bingham either live or on his previous CD (*Mescalito*). The title follows the theme of travel, of lost highways and long miles on the road. Which add to the sense of dislocation that underlines the road worthiness of *Roadhouse Sun*. Long may it shine.

#### Jessica Lea Mayfield With Blasphemy So Heartfelt Munich

Produced by the Black Keys Dan Auerbach this is the debut album from the young Mayfield and is a raw and ambient that could be called an alternative folk-rock built around Mayfield's distinctive vocal and writing. Her vocal has an energy and youthful looseness that is underpinned by the backing which is sometimes sparse and subtle but at other times has a harder, rawer edge more associated with indie rock. The songs do not rely on melody or obvious hooks rather the are full of attitude and anguish like the song *Call Me* where the singer laments the time spent waiting for a phone call. While the *The One That Love The Best* is about heartbreak and is matched by a yearning musical setting. Mayfield may well move in different directions on future releases but what's on offer here shows the initial spark that may start a fire.

#### Sarah Lee Guthrie and Johnny Irion Folksong RTE 8

A live recording that is a CD/DVD combination filmed from a show in California, it features the two voices and guitars (and harmonica) of the husband and wife team in a style that lives up to the album title. Irion's own recording tend towards a more rock, eclectic direction but here it's stripped down and direct and very powerful in its essence. There's humour and humanity in the songs which often are explained in the their introductions. The two formats feature some of the same songs but are not exact matches which makes them interesting in their own right. The two voices are blended to perfection and fit neatly into a couple of vocal harmony categories (country duets, brother duos, husband and wife harmonies) that are a delight in themselves and a good souvenir. It should also be noted that Irion is a very good guitar player and adds much to the overall sound. The duo co-write all the songs other than the title track, which was written by Woody Guthrie and the duo added the music. The thing to mention here is the powerful nature of the two voices are pontaneous and live and full of that sense of the moment, something special, folk songs for good-hearted folk.

#### Lil Mo and The Monicats On The Moon Cow Island

After a long break Lil Mo is back with a new album and since her last two albums, *Hearts In My Dream* and her self titled 1996 debut, she has refined her music to cover a wider platform of roots based vintage musical forms. Asi well as the rockabilly and country influenced songs there are now hints of jazz, cajun, soul, pop and r 'n' b. There is also a strong sense of continuity in that she has again co-produced the album with multi-instrumentalist Hank Bones who was on the previous two albums. Guests include Louisiana musician and Mamou Playboy Steve Riley who adds some accordion and fiddle to the song *Dance Crazed*, while Bones delivers some bluesy cornet to the old time tone of Why Don't You Live With Me? Alongside the accomplished originals Lil Mo covers a Bill Haley co-write *Rockin' Chair On The Moon* as jumpin' rockabilly while Wayne Walker's *I've Got A New Heartache* plays out as a country shuffle. Throughout she adapts her vocal approach to suit the various moods that the song take and does so with her customary flair, something that makes this album such an enjoyable listening experience. Fans of Imelda May would do well to check this album out. www.cowislandmusic.com

#### Hayseed Dixie Golden Shower Of Hits Cookin' Vinyl

For a one joke act these guys have been around a long time having made seven albums starting from the novel idea of cover AC/DC songs in a bluegrass style in 2001 and most recent album of original songs No Covers. This timely collection takes tracks from all the albums and includes *Highway* To *Hell*, *Ace* Of Spades, *War* Pigs and *I* Don't Feel Like Dancing. Original songs include John Wheeler's *Born To* Die In France and She Was Skinny When *I* Met Her. The thing to note here is that alongside the evident humour there is a subtle intelligence in both the concept and choice of songs, and in some of the writing and a level of musical skill that should be never be underestimated. If you have never owned a Hayseed Dixie CD then this is an ideal collection or if you have seen them live and know their exuberance then this will help you to relive that. Quite where they go from here is an open question but for now just enjoy Hayseed Dixie for what they were and are.

#### Anne McCue East Of Electric Self-Release

This album finds McCue in a more acoustic mode than on previous outings. She also emphasises her musical talent playing numerous instruments throughout the album including piano, drum and xylophone alongside the variety of string instruments she has more normally been associated with. Her vocals are again strong and emotive and on many tracks she harmonises with herself to add depth to the songs, all of which are originals which she has written or co-written. There are a couple of guests, notably Eamon McLoughlin on cello and violin. These songs are her take on that Sixties folk-rock sound that had expression in certain Beatle and Stones' album of that era as well as by such icons of the genre as Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan. But the end result does not sound like a vintage folk-rock album, rather McCue has taken that influence as an inspiration for the stripped down nature of the songs, taking them back to their raw essence and they work in that setting. A song like *Love's Not Passing Us* By and *Straight To The Heart* highlight her skills as singer, writer, player and producer. McCue is working on her next album and has recently toured here with Mundy and so should be familiar to those who caught the shows. Other should check out this and her previous albums for some memorable music.

#### Bryan Clark Gossip, Inspiration and Slander Rainfeather

A talented guitarist Clark has released this two CD set, one side electric and one side acoustic. The acoustic side is recorded with a full band of bluegrass players that include Casey Dreissen on fiddle and Matt Flinner on mandolin. Clark plays guitar and dobro as well as lead and background vocals on a set of mainly self-written songs. He also co-produced the album with Erick Jaskowiak. The traditional instrumental *Blackberry Blossom* highlights the undoubted talents of all involved while songs like *Nights Like These* featured striking vocal harmonies all of which will find favour with bluegrass and acoustic music fans in general. The second CD takes quite a different tack with a set of songs that share a number of common titles but quite a few unique to this set. Here again Clark shows his musical dexterity by playing all the instruments - bar a couple of additional players on two songs. His vocal are again impressive throughout even though this second set covers a range of rootsy styles from the steel guitar sounds of *Midnight Kisses* to the rockin' *The Way It Is* through the soulful *You Follow Me*. Although a mix of musical directions there is something here that should apoeal to many, with Bryan Clark's musical skills reetine a extended workout.

#### Steve Earle Townes New West

On first run through I thought ok Steve Earle singing Townes Van Zandt songs but what does he bring to them other than respect. However with more playing the difference

became more apparent and the album more of a Earle outing. I began to distance the originals and to find the heart of these versions which Steve Earle had recorded solo and then later added additional musicians to the mix. The songs, of course, will be familiar to any Townes fan, but may be new to some of Steve Earle audience, though as he has been a torch bearer for Townes for a long time they shouldn't be. In Earle's music this is closer to some of his post-prision output rather than the rock orientated Dukes albums. It is, as is fitting, given a more stripped down and sparse setting overall that has the voice and guitar central to the song's core, that and some of the greatest songwriting that there has ever been. He has picked such well know songs as *Pancho And Lefty* as well as lesser known such as *Where I Lead Me* which uses some distorted harmonic to add to the mood. *Lungs* is co-produced by John King while the remainder of the album is produced by Earle alone. The album is a poignant reminder ofVan Zandt's talent but also of Earles' as a interpreter and vocalist. He duets on *Mr. Mudd And Mr. Gold* with his Justin who he named after Townes, also in respect, and that is both effective and appropriate.

#### Dave Alvin And The Guilty Women Yep Roc

With his label, Yep Roc, simultaneously releasing two separate recording projects Alvin has been busy. After the death of his close friend and band mate Chris Gaffney. Alvin put his longtime band The Guilty Men on hold and in order to refresh his energies put together this band. It sounds like a different take on a familiar sound. The context and playing all has subtle differences that make this album work. Front and centre is Alvin's voice, guitar, songs and production but the additional of an all female supporting cast changes things, however gently. There is a gentleness about the album that is both context and gender based. Half the songs are written by Alvin and include such well know songs as the opening Marie Marie. It's time to introduce the ladies, a stellar cast - Cindy Cashdollar on steel. Nina Gerber on guitars, Amy Farris on violin, Laurie Lewis on mandolin and fiddle. Sarah Brown on bass and Lisa Pankratz on drums with Christy McWilson on lead and harmony vocals. A stellar selection of renowned players who ably deliver the goods. The song highlights include the McWilson lead vocal harmonies of her song Potter's Field, Alvin's Downey Girl, the Anne Egge, limmie Dale Gilmore, Sarah Browne co-write River Under The Road but these are just three of twelve songs that have no dead weights among them. Those who have followed Alvin's career to date will find much to admire here. He sounds like he's enjoy himself which is important in such times. You will too.

#### John Doe And The Sadies Country Club Yep Roc

The Sadies are one of the great bands, versatile and vital. They mix classic country with surf guitar, country rock and an independent attitude. Here they have teamed with seasoned veteran Doe, he of X, Knitters and solo albums to forge a collective take on some traditional country songs (and a couple of Sadies' instrumentals and one of their songs). Doe's weary lived in voice breathes life into these well chosen songs which include Stop The World And Let Me Off, Roger Miller's Husbands and Wives, Johnny Cash's I Still Miss Someone and Bill Anderson's Porter Wagoner classic The Cold Hard Facts Of Life among other songs of heartbreak, murder and occasional redemption, loining the crew are the likes of Eric Heywood and Bob Egan on pedal steel, a vital ingredient, and additional vocalists Kathleen Edwards, Margaret Good, Veronica lane Doe and Cindy Wasserman. The end result is a thoroughly entrancing package that gives some very well know songs a twist that gives them a contemporary sheen. While never surpassing the original versions it. none-the-less makes them credible and collectively charismatic. This is one of those pairings that gives both parties, who are more than capable of delivering in their own right. an album that adds up to a something greater than the individual elements. We can only hope this will lead to further live and recorded collaborations. This is the kind of Country Club we all would like to join.

#### Various Artists Man Of Someone's Dreams A tribute to Chris Gaffney Yep Roc

This is one of those collections that surpasses expectation and delivers a worthy tribute to the subject both in spirit and music. Chris Gaffney may not be a house hold name, and lived and worked largely under the radar of the mainstream, but through his own albums, his work with Dave Alvin's band and with his country soul band The Hacienda Brothers he made some great and lasting music. Here the artists cover songs written by Chris Gaffney, solo or as co-writes and the music is as wide as Gaffney's vision, a rich stew of Americana at its best. His great friend Dave Alvin acts as executive producer and puts his heart and soul into the project and with contributers such as Joe Ely, Los Lobos, Tom Russell, Freddy Fender, Dave Gonzales, Alejandro Escovedo and Jim Lauderdale as well as Alvin and a final recording from Gaffney, how could it be otherwise? With such an array of artists and songs there are bound to be particular favourites for each listener. And as

is the case with such an album everyone will find their own, often based on song or artist, especially for those familiar with either. Personally I'd plumb for Calexico's *Frank's Tavern*, Freddy Fender's *The Garden* (obviously recorded before Chris Gaffney's death as Fender himself died in 2006), Jim Lauderdale (with Ollabelle and John Graboff) delivering one of his best vocals on *Glass House*. That's right now but with further listening that could easily change as the is so much to absorb here. Then there's the closing track, a final recording from Gaffney himself, which makes a fitting end to this tribute, written by Stanley Wykoff and Michael Berberet it's vocal was recorded by Wykoff in his home and the rest of the backing added later *The Guitars Of My Dead Friends* is poignant and a perfect reminder of his talent. Along with the recent Doug Sahm tribute this album shows how a tribute album should turn out and how timeless the music of Chris Gaffney was.

#### Los Straightjackets The Further Adventures Of Yep Roc

Instrumental guitar music is often one of the hardest genres to pull off convincingly. But the StraightJackets, the Mexican wrestling mask wearing quartet manage to do so with aplomb. Founded back in the early 1990s they have been playing live and making albums, some with guest vocalists such as Big Sandy, since then. Here they offer thirteen slices of concise hook-laden instrumentals with enough change of pace and style to keep it interesting. The songs are written by a combination of members with guitarist Eddie Angel taking the lead role alongside co-guitarist Danny Amis. This may not be the sort of music that is ever going to rise above cult status but beyond that consideration Los StraightJackets are at the top of their game. Any one with an interest in this format should seek out the *Further Adventures Of* one of the best instrumental bands playing today.

#### The Gourds Haymaker! Yep Roc

This band have always blended an often disparate selection of musical styles together to create their good humoured music. Here on Haymaker! they take some of the miscellany of characters who dwell under Texas skies as the subject for some of these freewheeling soul/swamp/rhythmic/gospel/cajun/country/roots -rock songs (you get the picture). It's another slice of their Americana ambience. With three writers bringing material to the band you get lyrical variety and with different vocalists the overall sound is spontaneously tight and creatively loose. The songs have a high hit rate with songs like *Fossil Contender* and the two country titles *Country Love* and *Country Girl, Thurman* and the ode to *Shreveport*, all eminently catchy. Their take on The Band playing cajun music with Brooker T is well captured. The Gourds are one of those bands that continue to define themselves by being diverse and delightful. Haymaker! is the kind of album that should see them gain greater recognition as against some hipper names but long may the Gourds continue doing their thing

#### Jeremie Rhodes The Giants And How To Fight Them Black Tie

A scion of the Rhodes song writing family, who's currently touring with his mother Kimmie and has co-produced this album with brother Gabe, who also provides much of the instrumental work on the record. The sound is a low-key mix of subtle textures including keyboards and guitars that sit behind Jeremie's soft voice on a set of sometimes introspective song-writing. This is literate folk-pop that requires attention, it's not some quick blast of sonic sit-up-and-beg pop. Titles offer diverse perspectives on relationship in *The Sky Is Falling* and *The Sun Is Gonna To Shine*. The latter has a positive message bolstered by some uptempo playing and the repeated chorus. While Jeremie Rhodes will undoubtedly explore his sound going forward this album is a introduction to a singer/songwriter exploring the facets of love, life and the points in between. www.jeremierhodes.com

