

# LONESOME HIGHWAY

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EDIT 2

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The Lonesome Highway is sometimes a lonely place to travel the last few months have seen labels, magazines and shops all shut up shop. There is still some great music out there and we hope to have the opportunity to review the music and speak to the artists involved wherever possible.

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.

Thanks to Jo at HumpHead, Stevo Burebe, Geraint Jones at G Music, WJ Hunt at Cow Island Music, Fergus Deneham at Yep Roc, Martha Moore, Universal Music Group in Dublin amongst others.

We would also like to thank those promoters, especially Derek Nally, who have allowed us access to gigs to conduct interviews.

This issue was written, edited, photographed and 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](http://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.

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THE HANDSOME FAMILY  
LIVE AT WHELANS 6/4/2009  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY RONNIE NORTON



A photograph of Bap Kennedy, a man with dark, slightly messy hair, wearing a dark blue or black long-sleeved shirt. He is seated and playing a light-colored acoustic guitar. His left hand is on the neck of the guitar, and his right hand is positioned over the sound hole. He is looking down at the guitar with a focused expression. The background is a rustic wall made of vertical wooden planks. The lighting is somewhat dramatic, with shadows on his face and the wall.

# BAP KENNEDY

“Punk and Country music  
share simplicity...  
and simplicity tends to  
travel well down the years.”

*Bap Kennedy's first foray into performance was in the latter days of punk with Sellout. A couple of years later he was the lead singer of Energy Orchard who released their debut album on MCA. When that band split Kennedy went to Nashville to record his first solo album, Domestic Blues, which was produced by Steve Earle. Returning to London he set up his own label and released his next album Lonely Street. Bap has also released a Hank Williams tribute Hillbilly Shakespeare and The Big Picture. He has now issued his latest collection Howl On.*

*You're first musical outing was with a punk band at age 16 would you consider that the attitude of punk was a back-bone to your career?*

Yes I would. Hank Williams was a punk as far as I'm concerned. 3 chords and an attitude can go a long way... and I've bumped into a lot of former punks who eventually went into country music. Punk and Country music share simplicity... and simplicity tends to travel well down the years.

*Energy Orchard was successful enough to allow you to have a life in music starting with a major label deal. As a band member what did you learn from that experience?*

I learned a lot... I made a lot of expensive mistakes and looking back now I realise that my own instincts were good but I'd listened to bad advice because I was young and naive. And as for being part of a band I eventually learned that democracy is a great idea for society at large...but not for a bunch of Belfast lads/musicians who wanted to get loaded as often as possible (me included). Somebody has to take charge of the music and direction and not everyone can see the vision.

*The band lasted 6 years before it splintered what was your inspiration to start a solo career?*

I just kept writing and had no plans or desire for any other kind of life. Steve Earle was a big influence on doing it your own way and of course Van Morrison who was producing his own records in his early twenties... as long as the songs were there I just expected to make another record and work with better musicians

*Domestic Blues your first solo album was produced by your old friend Steve Earle in Nashville and initially released on his E-Squared label. Was that a liberating and fruitful time?*

That was really when I began to make records I was happy with. Before that it had always been a frustrating experience. I began to work with very talented musicians for the first time and Steve was a sympathetic intuitive producer. That album was the turning point for me as a writer and I was finally able to see what production was all about. Its all about the song and its all about the voice and not letting anything get in the way of capturing it.

*On the album it states "coming soon Domestic Bliss" had you a follow up companion piece planned? If so did any of those tracks actually surface later?*

That was a joke at the time but you never know. I still might make that record. I'm currently living in domestic bliss



*Domestic Blues was grounded in American roots music and it's follow up was inspired by Hank Williams and Elvis Presley. When did their music, and roots music in general, become such a strong influence?*

Elvis from the get go. I bought the soundtrack to King Creole when I was about nine. I was crazy about Elvis until my mid teens. Then as a teenager I thought that was deeply uncool. Nowadays I think the opposite. I rediscovered Elvis in my thirties and really didn't get Hank until I was making Domestic Blues. I'd heard a lot of Hank songs get murdered in Belfast clubs by dodgy cover bands when I was growing up and thought they were corny - but the more you get into roots the more you get to the source - and now of course in my eyes Hank is the greatest songwriter ever.

*You recorded a tribute to the former, Hillbilly Shakespeare, was Hank a major influence on your writing?*

Hank was the master of deep simplicity and that's what I aim for in my songs. There's a fine line between simple and trite lyrics.

*Is songwriting an easy or hard thing for you?*

Writing is easy...Its the inspiration and ideas that are harder to come by. Plenty of people can write a song..not many can

write good ones and keep it up..that's the trick. I chewed on the space race idea for a couple of years and let the ideas ferment - then wrote 90% of the songs in about a week when I had a deadline to record the album.

*You have been involved with the production of your music as well as projects like the King album and Jana's Light Other Side Of Heartache. Do you find that it as a creative an outlet as being on the other side of the studio window?*

I like to facilitate creativity..Its the greatest thing there is when a track comes from nowhere. You go into a studio and the tape is blank..and then somehow a bit of magic happens and a great song with a great vocal suddenly comes to life..Its mysterious and wonderful when it happens..and when it doesn't its very dispiriting for all concerned. The last record I produced was my wife's and it was her first time making a record. Thankfully it turned out really good. (Brenda Kennedy- 'Banish the Blue Days')

*There is a dedication to Van Morrison on The Big Picture cover to say that the album wouldn't exist without him. Can you explain his influence and also his role in the album?*

Van has made a huge impact on just about every songwriter I've come across. He mythologised Belfast in his songs and



made the streets seem cool and magical - so for me he's the major influence. I first met him when we were on the same bill at the Fleadh festival in London in 1989 or 1990. He's taken an interest in what I do since then and I've supported him many times and got to perform Gloria with him on stage ( 3 times. ). He co wrote a song with me for the Big Picture ( Milky Way ) and gave me full use of his studio to finish the album. Van has been very good to me and I hope someday I can return the favour.

*Your brother, Brian, has played with Van, was the introduction made through him or where you acquainted before that?*

I think Brian met him in the early nineties, just after me.

*You have always had some great guitar players working with you from Ed Deane, James Walbourne and now on the new album Peter O'Hanlon. How important is that role to you?*

For me its vital... I need some entertainment too you know! I love to play with tasty players and all the above are tasty.

*The solo albums you have made have all been well received but it is always difficult to translate that into lasting commercial success from an independent stand point. As label owner how does that effect your music?*

As long as I can eat and pay the bills and not have to go to some humdrum job everyday..and keep on making records that get at least 4 stars then I'm happy.

*Howl On has the moon landings as a theme running through it. Was that a time that intriguing for you?*

It was and still is...It seems even more bizarre as time passes. I can't imagine something like that happening in todays world. I think in the end it was pure theatre..the greatest show on earth and some commentators have called the Apollo missions "the last optimistic act of the 20th century". I firmly believe that in a thousand years from now (if mankind is still around ) the moon landings will be what the 20th century is remembered for.

*That time may be the wider context but coming from Belfast how did growing up there, at what was a difficult time, affect you?*

I was seven and just beginning to realise bad things were happening in my neighbourhood. All of a sudden burning cars and barricades were everywhere. It was intense and I think it gave me a taste for the intense in later life..my only goal was and still is - to have an interesting and fulfilling life.

*You're recent marriage suggests a new level of happiness. Does that have an influence on how and what you write?*

The marriage came after a pretty bad couple of years..I'd quit drinking after decades of hard living and I decided to change my life in every area that wasn't working. Two years ago I moved back to Ireland after more than twenty years of exile and then met Brenda. As far as writing goes, I think I'm better at it now and maybe more focused. I think there are two distinct phases in my life now. Everything that happened before I met my wife and everything after. This is without doubt is the best bit so far.

*Have you plans to tour this album? How difficult is that in a recession era?*

I'll be touring from September/October onwards..I'll be kicking off in Ireland, the UK and Europe and then I'll be heading to Australia in the new year. America after that. Some shows with a band - some more acoustic. There's always a way.

*What does the future hold for Bap Kennedy?*

More of the same I hope... If I win the lottery I'll just keep writing songs until the money runs out.



PAUL BURCH'S MUSIC COMES FROM AN ERA WHEN RADIO PLAYED THE BEATLES BACK TO BACK WITH OTIS REDDING AND BUCK OWENS. WHILE HE IS ROOTED IN THIS TIME THE MUSIC HE WRITES AND PLAYS IS FOR TODAY NOT SOME RETRO-BASED RETREAD. RATHER HIS MUSIC IS VERY MUCH HIS OWN VOICE AND VISION.

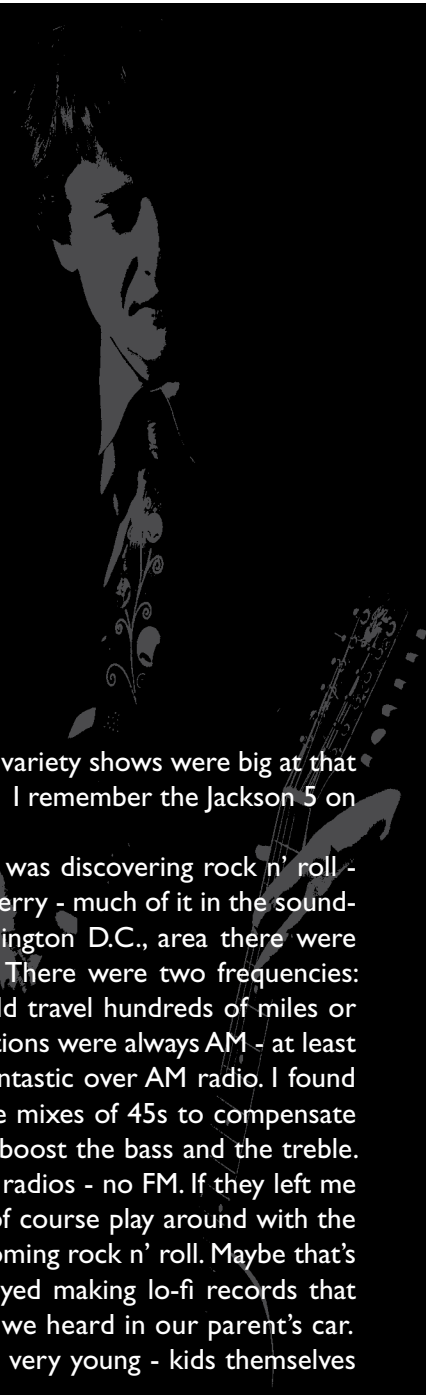
# PAUL BURCH

***As you were born in 1966 what kind of music were you listening to on the radio and around your house?***

A lot of the music I heard as a child came through a car radio. If I was in my grandparents car, I heard Sinatra, Peggy Lee - probably some cross over country like Roger Miller's King of the Road. If I was with my parent's car, it was all the hits of the day; from the Beatles, to Motown, Sly Stone, Jimi Hendrix. The first song I remember hearing on the radio was the Ballad of John & Yoko. The dj was very excited to reveal that John and Paul were playing all the instruments. I remember thinking "how did they do that?" and "no Ringo?" So that would have been 1969. To my parents, the Beatles and Bob Dylan were very big as were the Rolling Stones and Smokey Robinson. I thought Smokey was a beautiful writer and later on when I was a teenager and started to write, Smokey was foremost in my mind when I thought about writing songs. I guess I was a very serious kid at times because I remember thinking or saying to someone: "If you can't write as good as Smokey Robinson, then why bother?" My grandfather listened to opera, and some Ravel I remember. He called rock n' roll "that rock dreck". But he did say he liked Bill Monroe's *Blue Moon of Kentucky*. I don't know when or how he would have heard that. Both my grandmothers were Sinatra fans but it took me well into my adulthood

before I was ready to listen to Frank. Television variety shows were big at that time. I recall the Tom Jones Show and *Hee Haw*. I remember the Jackson 5 on the Carol Burnett Show quite a bit.

What turned my head right before punk music was discovering rock n' roll - Gene Vincent, Buddy Holly, Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry - much of it in the soundtrack album to *American Graffiti*. In the Washington D.C., area there were what they called 'oldies' stations on the radio. There were two frequencies: AM which was a bit of a cloudy signal but could travel hundreds of miles or FM which was more high fidelity. The oldies stations were always AM - at least where I was - and the 50's records sounded fantastic over AM radio. I found out later that American Studios would alter the mixes of 45s to compensate for the loss of certain frequencies. They would boost the bass and the treble. All of my families' cars tended to only have AM radios - no FM. If they left me in the car to go into a store or something, I'd of course play around with the tuner and find these far out stations playing booming rock n' roll. Maybe that's why so many musicians of my generation enjoyed making lo-fi records that sound like they're coming from an AM station we heard in our parent's car. I was very fortunate, too that my parents were very young - kids themselves



practically. They got into all the things that were hip in the early 70's - songwriters like Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, John Prine - all of that was around the house. I loved it - and still do - but rock n' roll and R&B was what lit me up.

***You have mentioned bringing home records from the Smithsonian Institute. That suggests that you were interested in earlier forms of music from an early age. Would that be true?***

I was very interested in early forms of music but I didn't know to call them that then. One of the great advantages about the Washington D.C. area was that it was rich in many styles of music and all of them seemed to be hitting some kind of a revival at the same time. Thanks to the folk boom in the 60's, a lot of artists like Mississippi John Hurt, Dock Boggs, and Skip James were making records again or performing. In the Smithsonian museum I went to there was a store in the basement that had records for sale. Probably most of the albums were on Folkways which came in plain black sleeves with a single color sticker pasted over the front with song titles, a photo, and maybe a brief description. I used to listen to an album of cowboy songs by Peter LeFarge, Woody Guthrie's *Dustbowl Ballads*, The Skillet Lickers, Pete Seeger. My cuckoo-clock sense of timing comes from quite a lot of that. One of the accomplishments I'm most proud of since I've been in Nashville is that Fats Kaplin calls me to 'second' him on guitar when he plays fiddle tunes. Fats, who plays in the WPA, is a very accomplished musician with a wide chord vocabulary that dwarfs my small abilities on guitar. But the timing and feel to those songs is second nature to me and that's a difficult thing to find in the new Nashville.

I also got to see a lot of the greats before they vanished and seeing someone perform for an hour set me straight on all kinds of confusion that came from listening to records. Records are terrific but I think very few of those performers prior to rock 'n' roll took records as seriously as people do now.

***You were inspired to play drums after seeing Jason and The Scorchers live, was that a time that you were aware of a revitalized country music crossed with punk energy?***

When I saw Jason & the Scorchers I had been banging around on a drum set for a few years. But that was the first concert I recall that really felt like my own. For one thing, they destroyed Bob Dylan's *Absolutely Sweet Marie* which I thought was fantastic but I remember thinking "I don't think my parents are going to appreciate what they did to that



song." My parents listened to a lot of cool music so I had not felt the deep generational gap that they had felt breaking off from their parents. But at that time the film *The Big Chill* had been released with a soundtrack of Motown songs and all of a sudden, the songs from my parent's childhood that they had pretty much left behind - Motown, Stax, Beatles - music that I had adored without having to endure any literature or backstory - became the new 'oldies'.

Then came a rush to go back to the 60's and market it as nostalgia and my favorite 50's radio stations disappeared. And in place of that was a kind of gooey, sentimental trend towards trivializing what had been really serious music to me. A song like *Ain't To Proud to Beg* had been a serious song for me to discover and now it was selling toilet paper and shaving cream.

So at 14 to hear Jason make a Bob Dylan song into something new was terrific. I thought 'yeah, take that!'

Soon after that, I started thinking of country music as a kind of safe place for me to learn to be a musician. Discovering country to me was like meeting a relative who had been banished from family gatherings. You've been told he's an evil, twisted, troll but he turns out to be quite hip. So much of the early 70's was very country. Pedal steel was on every record: John Prine's first album, James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James*, Clapton with Delaney & Bonnie, *Get Back* by the Beatles had a guitar solo imitating a pedal steel. And you had the Band and the Allman Brothers. Country was a haven for musicianship.

This sounds weird to say now but all of my teenage friends in high school and college were very keen on the idea of not 'selling out'. Big reverb meant sell out and for me *The Big Chill* was the beginning of selling out and white washing the 60's. As a music fan there's a big difference between 1965 and 1967 but now for commercial purposes it's all one big crazy decade. The best music of my formative years tended to be made by people who seemed to be making music under the constant threat of being kicked off their label. Or out of their house.

***You have subsequently played with Jason Ringenberg, appearing here in Ireland with him. Was that fun?***

It's always fun to play with Jason. We performed a lot at John Cleere's pub in Kilkenney which was a terrific music room. When you're on the bill with Jason you just have



to stand back. There's really no need to try to stop what you know is coming. He's just a force of nature and I love it.

***Your grandmother Vivian would appear to be a strong influence on your sense of music and she played a role in the direction of the new album. How important was that?***

Vivian was a music lover and a terrific piano player. She tried to teach me a little piano when I was very young and I wish I could have had the patience to learn more from her at the time. I've always had a lot of extraordinary piano players in my orbit but sadly it didn't seem to make an impression until much later. But some of the things she showed me are coming in handy now. The influence piano had on the writing for *Still Your Man* was pretty great because when Vivian's piano arrived in my studio as a gift, I found that I did know enough to try to compose on it. *Down to the Blackmarket* for instance, comes out of a New Orleans-ish take on *Frankie and Albert*. Also Jen Gunderman joined the group near the end of the last record (*East to West*) and she's a real piano player. So I enjoyed trying to come up with something for her to riff on.

***The music you have made has always combined contemporary attitude and sounds with classic forms. Is that what you set out to do?***

I very foolishly didn't think at all what I was going to do when I started in the music business. I'm not even convinced I am in the music business. The only goal I had was to make records so I guess I did what I set out to do. I recently heard Nick Lowe describe his reason for getting off the touring circuit was because he was playing to an adoring 'audient'. It's a very strange business to make a living in. Most of my time in the business I've been blissfully ignorant of what I'm doing right or wrong. The artists I admired and still admire, from Jimmie Rodgers to Sam Cooke to Ray Charles to Elvis Costello - I admire because they did what felt right to them and made it into their own sound. Even if at times I didn't care for it, I appreciated the pursuit of freedom of expression which is their greatest achievement. And today it still is a heroic achievement to have real freedom of expression. Everyone thinks they have it - initially - but in truth a lot of music is made under duress. I figure that if I do good work, the rest will take care of itself. And that's an accomplishment a lot of people don't get to make. It's not heroic in my case but it has been heroic feat for many of the musicians I admire.

***After you moved to Nashville in the early '90s you began to play down in, what was then, the run-down area of Lower Broadway. That in some ways has framed the perception of what you do. Is that something you regret or is it a fair assessment?***

I loved those shows in downtown Nashville. I played for many hours and had to be very resourceful. It gave me a bit of street cred, playing country music in a real honky tonk while chairs were being thrown through windows and guns were drawn. I don't

think a situation like that could exist again in Nashville. And a lot of the real honky tonk guys came down to say hello. I met Faron Young, Vassar Clements, and many songwriters from the early Nashville days. I doubt they thought we were very good but they knew it was from the heart. I don't mind the perception that my roots are there. That music is still a revelation to many. It's an all but lost art.

***There is also a strong element of blues in your make-up, you have recorded a cover of Little Walter's It Ain't Right for your new album, but you would not be perceived as bluesman per se. How have you incorporated that strand, and others, into your music?***

I'm drawn to any music that seems to make its pull without any restraint or anything held back. In that sense a lot of Cajun music from the late 40's and 50's has what I hear in great blues and country music - a willingness to let go. Some cynics will say that rural music is somehow deficient because it doesn't observe polite western rules. But the purpose of all music is to communicate and blues and country in all its various forms was always live music, meant to be played in front of an audience. So the great performers and even the not-so-great tended to give everything they got when they had a chance to record. They didn't worry about making the studio a part of the process. I love the studio and I've made good use of it over the years but the most satisfying music I've made is when I put the pressure on myself to be ready to sing and play at the same time and just put it down. There's not a huge difference between the tone of Roy Acuff's sound and Magic Sam's. To do either you have to sing from the gut and believe in what you're singing. I'm drawn to any music that can get very intense without resorting to just tricks of volume. For a lot of artists singing was the only freedom they ever knew. How can you not to be drawn to that?

***For your recording location you have been looking for a place with a sonic signature, a place with a sense of sound. Is your new studio that place?***

I have a small studio that does seem to have a unique sound. Whether that can show up on the records I'm not sure but I enjoy working without a clock and also having a place where the WPA can work together as a group. Nashville is still a world-class city to work in but the trend over the last few years has been to get rid of a lot of the performance/big room studios that used to be all over town. I use the studio to paint with music. That sounds a bit silly in print probably but it's like working with clay or some other medium. I build up and tear down all the time until I know something and feel something so well that I can record it and perform it without thinking about it. Also, trying to be creative while looking at the clock and imagining what your bill is going to be is tough.

***The WPA are important to you in that you gather together a group of independent***





PHOTOGRAPH BY RONNIE NORTON

***thinkers, musicians you have likened to jazz ensembles like Charles Mingus' groups. Do you look for that element of chance and surprise in their playing?***

The element of chance that comes out in a WPA performance is partly a result of performing without a lot of rehearsals. We perform at a small pub in the neighborhood about once or twice a month and rather than go through awkward rehearsals I think it's more fun to learn on the job. It's not right for every song or every show but when it does work, the spontaneity can lead to some hysterical musical moments. I think it's good for me as a composer and hopefully good for the musicians as well to rediscover how elastic the classic forms can be.

***How do you pick the players?***

The best way to pick a band for me has been to find players who have an individual style and like a lot of music. In a town like Nashville, it takes a brave musician to admit that he can't be anything to everyone. And I also go for the underdog - musicians who have great ability and are great people and could be on the touring circuit but have opted to not go the route of easy gratification by doing something they don't believe in for money. I don't begrudge anyone paying the bills. But Nashville is so competitive that if you opt out of the touring or studio route, no one calls you. It can come down to: do you want to grow as a musician or make your living as a musician? I'm making a bet that I can do both. I think the WPA is that kind of forum. If not, we'll soon find out.

***You have also recorded albums where you have played all the instruments yourself. How different is that to working with other musicians?***

I enjoy knocking about on other instruments but when I do, I tend to play like the members of the WPA, partly as homage but also because I like to write with them in mind. If we could all read and write music, I might just say "here's something like your style, can you elaborate?" Usually a little demo I make that's full of me banging away on all the instruments is made much better once the band gets a go at it. Occasionally, as with *Last of My Kind* something happens that results in a unique sound and the WPA says "leave it be". But the band is sounding so interesting now I think it will be awhile before I try another one by myself.

***Are you a prolific writer and where do you draw inspiration for the songs from? Still Your Man has an interactive theme of devotion at its heart, did those around you inspire that?***

I try to write everyday. Sometimes it's only a few lines. Sometimes an entire song. That discipline suits me. Melodies come to me pretty easily. But I've gotten very picky about pursuing something right away unless an idea burns really hot. Some writers tick off a song a day. My tunes are more like junk yard dogs. They don't always come when they're called. I have to train them and let them live around the house for awhile. The

songs for *Still Your Man* came without much hassle. The hardest part was learning to how to record them. I had a sound and a tone in mind and that always helps. I still had to wrestle quite a few of them to the ground.

***Where do you see yourself now. Are you happy having the freedom to record what you wish as a trade-off against possible interference that would come with a major label signing? Or would that be something that you would aspire to?***

I can say without hesitation that I love the freedom I have but if Verve or Sony knocked on my door, I'd love that, too. I have no illusions about the business. From here on out, it's going to be a mud slinging, grenade hurling slugfest to get anything heard. The major labels sold out their management to people who don't have a clue on how to make records. But there's a lot of silliness going on in the independent world, too. I figure the better I am at what I do - whatever that is - the label can't really change me. Hopefully the better the label, the better their ability to help the music reach more people. Have you heard the four stages of the music business? First is "who is Paul Burch?", then "get me someone who sounds like Paul Burch", "get me Paul Burch" and finally, "who is Paul Burch?". I might be at 1 or I might be at 4 and slept through 2 and 3.

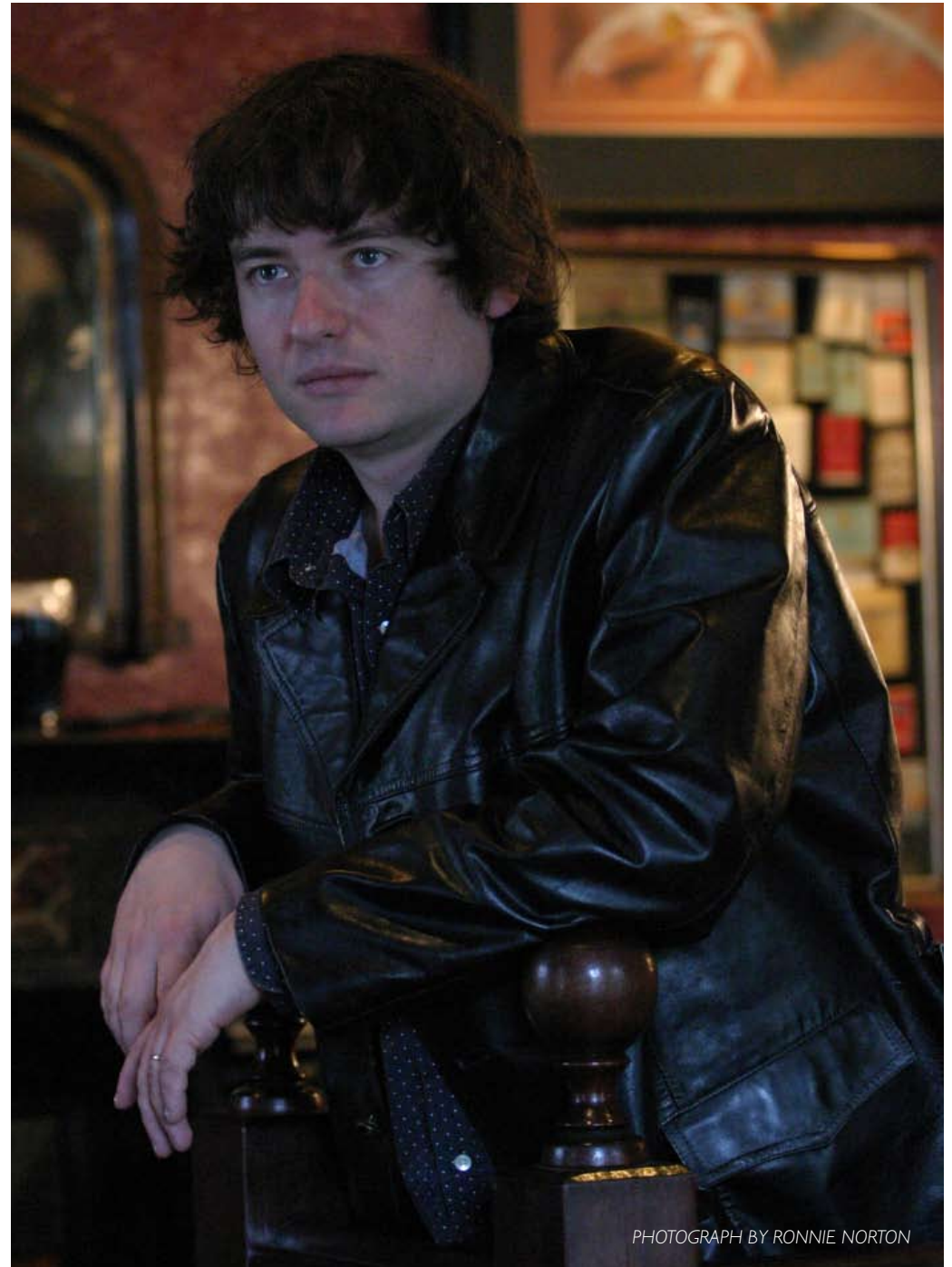
***After 7 albums Paul Burch's music is perhaps best defined as Paul Burch Music. What you like your musical legacy to be?***

When you ask it like that it sounds a bit gloomy. I hope my legacy is 'he stuck at it until he finally made a record everyone wants to listen to'.

*Still Your Man* is released on Ramseur Records.



INTERVIEW BY STEPHEN RAPID



PHOTOGRAPH BY RONNIE NORTON





# PINTO BENNETT FAMOUS MOTEL COWBOY

PINTO BENNETT WAS BORN IN IDAHO IN 1948. HE WORKED IN THE LIVESTOCK INDUSTRY, AND HAD A NAVAL CAREER. DURING THE 1970'S HE STARTED HIS MUSICAL CAREER. PINTO TOURED REGULARLY IN AMERICA, GREAT BRITAIN AND IN IRELAND WITH HIS LEGENDARY BAND THE FAMOUS MOTEL COWBOYS. LONESOME HIGHWAY CAUGHT UP WITH HIM AT HIS HOME IN IDAHO.

Interview by Stephen Rapid, With thanks to Danielle Bennett and Sergio Webb  
Illustration taken from the cover of Ravages Of Time on Hitsound Records NL

## **Can you tell me a little about growing up in rural Idaho?**

I grew up out where the hoot-owls screw the chickens. Southwestern Idaho is a broad expanse of desert and mountains with one horse towns many miles apart. I love it. That's why I came home. Growin' up in the sheep-camp was a good thing for a kid. Builds character. Although nobody would probably ever know it by me. Read a little Zane Grey and you'll know how it feels.

## **What are your earliest memories of music there and what were your formative influences?**

I don't remember not lovin' music. My dad was a picker. That and the sheep-camp were my first memories of life.

## **When did you start to make music and write songs?**

There was always the piano and my dad's ol' guitar around. I was always banging on somthin'. Got hooked on Elvis and started gettin' serious. After an interesting naval career, I started gettin' really serious. Going from being a fleet sailor to being a road musician seemed like a natural progression.

## **Recording and touring have been a major part of your life. Do you enjoy one over the other?**

After workin long an' hard I finally got the chance to make a real record. I look back and after all these years I think about the road and the studio. The road was a blast but I can still make records. In retro I love 'em both.

## **You have had some success in Europe and brought real honky tonk music to Ireland. How did that contrast with playing in the States?**

For country music fans, you can play my style of honky-tonk anywhere in the wold and get away with it. I suppose they all can enjoy it in their own way.

## **One some of those trips you were looked after by Phil Kaufmann. There must be some tales there?**

On the pint 'n' piss tour of Ireland with "Road Mangler Deluxe" Phil Kaufman we had one of the best times of our lives. All of the Famous Motel Cowboys will agree. (see *A Pint-or-Two With Pinto in Road Mangler Deluxe* by Phil Kaufman)

## **Which album, of yours, are you proudest of?**

Records are like kids. Most have some redeeming qualities. Sometimes you get a rotten one but so far I've been blessed. The ones you take the most care with will be the best. Sometimes in life you don't have time to give them equal care an' folks'll know.

## **There is a reference on the internet to The Motel Cowboys being "by far the best honky-tonk band that ever was" does that seem right?**

Famous Motel Cowboys was the hardest workin' honky-tonk band that ever was and we got the most respect. That's the best and that seems right. Songs like Honky-Tonk Asshole and Hardcore Cowboy say, That's OK we're gonna kick yer ass anyway. These days I'm a heart patient at the Veterans Hospital at Boise and I live at a place called Indian Cove. The old sheep-camp where I grew up. Sixty some miles southeast of Boise, between Hammett and Bruneau. You might be able to find it on the internet but I doubt it.

## **How is life now and where does your music fit in?**

I'm still writin songs and doin the odd gig and I'm writin the screenplay for Famous Motel Cowboys the movie (my son is a movie guy).

## **Reckless Kelly have recorded an album of your songs and you were involved in the process too. How much fun was that?**

Reckless Kelly has recorded an album of some of my songs. Sergio (Webb - FMC) who's co-writer on several of them and I went to Austin to hang with the lads for inspiration and support. Robbie (Matson - FMC) was there to engineer and help produce. The whole scene was only the greatest!

## **What plans do you have for the future and do you have any plans to come to Europe again?**

Frontier Airlines pissed me off so bad I blew a gasket. When I went to my regular checkup at the vets, they took me to the emergency room. I'm recoopin' as I'm writin' this. I don't care if it takes me a month to get somewhere, I'll never fly again!

## **How about your own recordings?**

Right now I'm not making any plans, just waitin' fer God. But, if it works out I'd like to take a trampship over and visit you guys. Maybe do some jammin'.

I've been recording. Last fall I did a retrospective album called Experience Pinto Bennett. My producer Buck Ramsey has always wanted to do a record of his favorite songs that we've picked over the years. It's mostly old stuff, several new ones and a couple covers. It's a great record and I'm proud of it. We recorded it at Steve Fulton's Audio Lab in Boise.

My next project is a Gospel album. I've got the songs written but everythings on hold while the sawbones are sortin' out my ticker.

## **What do you think of what passes for country music these days?**

I don't know if it's an old guy thing, but I don't listen to music anymore, unless I'm playin it. But, the kids and the grandkids do and once in awhile inadvertently I'll hear one I like but for the most part, to me, it all sounds the same.

# CHRISTOPHER REES

## REDEMPTION SONGS

*INTERVIEW BY STEPHEN RAPID*



PHOTOGRAPH BY RONNIE NORTON



## **GIVEN THE DARKER NATURE OF SOME OF YOUR SONGS WHEN YOU WERE GROWING UP WERE YOU A BIG READER OF MACABRE BOOKS?**

No, not at all. I was certainly not a big fan of horror books or films. Far from it. But, I was a big fan of David Lynch and his rather twisted and strange view of the world. As far as reading goes I was more fascinated with the whole ‘Beat Generation’ of writers with the likes of Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and later on Charles Bukowski. But I think as an impressionable 16 or 17 year old, watching ‘Twin Peaks’ back in 1990 probably effected and influenced me more than I actually realised. I guess the murder of Laura Palmer and the way that Lynch told that story, along with Angelo Badalamenti’s tremolo infused musical score fascinated me.

## **GROWING UP IN WALES WHAT MUSIC WERE YOU CONSCIOUS OF?**

Well, of course growing up in Wales we all had to sing hymns in school assembly and in church on Sunday mornings and my dad did love a male voice choir, but the first music that really excited and captivated me at a young age came from Elvis Presley and rock’n’roll. I remember watching his films on afternoon’s when I was off sick from school and being glued to the TV. Then one of my Auntie’s gave my brother an Elvis song book for Christmas one year and we’d both sing along and sometimes if we didn’t know the song just make up our own melodies with the words. I don’t think that I was really very influenced by parents tastes in music although I do remember some Willie Nelson and Dolly Parton cassettes in the car on journeys to visit family in West Wales. Of course Tom Jones is an almost religious figure to us all. Well, maybe not all of us but certainly to me. His voice is a gargantuan force of nature, as is Shirley Bassey’s. I’m very proud that those two figure’s are Welsh and I think they probably influenced the fact that I love singers with big passionate voices before I even discovered soul music or other crooners. It’s weird that I’ve only recently discovered Dorothy Squires even though she actually came from my home town of Llanelli. She had an unbelievable voice. She’d sing like she was ripping her heart out.

But then later on when I really got into art and music I went through the whole 6th form indie teenager thing. First with the ‘Madchester’ scene, then the ‘Shoegazing’ scene, then ‘Grunge’, then I think I started developing my tastes and discovering artists and bands with more long lasting importance.

I was still a big fan of Elvis and also became hooked on people like Otis Redding, Neil Young, REM and Throwing Muses. You know when you are 16 or 17 and you think that you’ve discovered something that none of your friends know about. Well Throwing Muses were that band for me, while everybody else was into The Pixies. I also used to host a little 2hr Hospital Radio show when I was in school, mainly playing my brothers records. I used to do this little feature every week called ‘The Blues Triangle’, where I’d play three blues tracks back to back. I only had three blues albums. One by Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters and BB King, so I’d just play a different track from them every week.

I’m sure I had next to no listeners and you certainly weren’t allowed to play any songs related to death so it’s a good job I hadn’t discovered any ‘Murder Ballads’ back then.

Discovering The Velvet Underground and first hearing John Cale’s voice on ‘The Gift’ was a monumental moment for me. I realised that a young guy from Garnant in the Amman Valley (where I frequently used to play football on Saturday’s) could go to New York and end up in the coolest band in the world was just mind blowing for me. It helped me to look further afield than Llanelli, Wales and towards the wider world across the Atlantic in America.

## **I KNOW YOU ARE AN ADMIRER OF THE WORK OF JOHN CALE. HAS HIS ECLECTIC APPROACH AND LYRICAL SONGS BEEN A TEMPLATE FOR YOU?**

Well, I wouldn’t say he’s provided any kind of template for me, but he has certainly been a huge influence and inspiration - as much for his life story as his musical innovations, maverick individuality and formidable identity. There is always something incredibly inspiring about the ‘local boy made good’ story but it’s much more than that. I think I connected with his presence and delivery in a much closer way than I had done with other artists. When I first saw him play live, solo, at The Brangwyn Hall in Swansea on the ‘Fragments Of A Rainy Season’ tour in 1992 it was a very real and profoundly effecting moment for me. I sat on the front row and was absolutely engrossed by the power of one man and his music. He reminded me of other Welsh preachers that I had encountered and the Dylan Thomas poems he was interpreting were also very effecting. But it all came together when he performed his version of Elvis’s Heartbreak Hotel. I was dumbstruck but it all made sense to me somehow.

I also remember thinking at that time, after being less than impressed with the support act, that I would one day open for John Cale. And low and behold ten years later I did! A very big deal for me.

As far as an eclectic approach is concerned I think that just comes from having a broad perspective on music. I think that having ‘good taste’ is to appreciate the best of all genres of music whether it’s rock or pop, jazz, funk, soul, folk, country or Haitian Voodoo drumming or whatever and not being restricted by any boundaries that exist between genres or styles or fashion or culture.

## **YOU HAVE DRAWN FROM AMERICANA - ROCKABILLY, BLUES, BLUEGRASS, SOUL, FOLK, GOSPEL BUT THERE IS ALSO A SENSE OF A CIRCLE COMPLETED IN THAT MUCH OF THAT MUSIC HAS IT’S ROOTS IN ENGLAND, SCOTLAND, WALES AND IRELAND. THROW IN A LITTLE PUNK ATTITUDE AND DO WE HAVE THE BEDROCK OF CHRISTOPHER REES’ MUSIC?**

Quite possibly. It’s like I said about having ‘good taste’ and appreciating the best of all types of music. The boundaries of different genres so very often get blurred and blend into one another anyway. Elvis for example would often cross boundaries by singing rockabilly, blues, gospel, country and others styles. Ray Charles would play soul, jazz, gospel, blues and country. Perhaps it’s only the modern day press that likes everything to be neatly pigeon holed for easy classification. Although saying that Elvis did get shunned by the ‘Grand Ole Opry’ for not really being country enough. And his energy was as punk rock as anything. There will always be conservative purists who like to keep things compartmentalised but it’s impossible to prevent music cross

pollinating and mutating whether we like it or not. The problem that I can see with eclecticism is a question of how to be marketed in this day and age, but that's only a commercial concern not an artistic one. The hope is that the good will out in the end and people will appreciate it for being genuine and sincere no matter what style it takes.

The interesting thing about that sense of circle in my influences is that yes, through exploring the roots of American music from Rock'n'Roll and rockabilly to blues, country, bluegrass, folk, prison songs and gospel etc. I have come all the way back to old folk songs from the UK that were taken to America by immigrants, taken into the churches, picked up by African slaves and taken forward from there. The circle has since gone around several times with 'The British Invasion' of the 60's and back and forth many times time. Music like fashion will keep going around in circles with new things happening along the way.

I believe any punk attitude or energy that I may have comes from environmental factors as much as musical influences. I firmly believe that there is a certain angst and intensity that is inherent in a lot of Welsh people as a result of the landscape and environment that surrounds us. There is an intensity in the way that a lot of people particularly from West Wales just speak to each other. And maybe that stirs something much deeper inside them when it comes to creative output. We are passionate people here in Wales. But then punk means a lot of different things to a lot of different people. If being full of genuine conviction, passion, individual drive and energy is punk then that's fine by me.

**MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH YOUR MUSIC WAS A SOLO ARTIST SUPPORTING THE HANDSOME FAMILY. THAT IS, OBVIOUSLY, A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE THAN THE RECORDED VERSION OR WHEN YOU PLAY WITH A BAND. YOU SEEM ABLE TO ADAPT AND DELIVER ON DIFFERENT LEVELS. DO YOU HAVE A PREFERENCE FOR THE BEST WAY TO GET YOUR MUSIC ACROSS?**

I hope that the songs are strong enough to translate whether I'm performing solo or with a band. There is definitely a different energy in the songs when I perform them with a full band and they call out for a bigger stage, but sadly at the moment I still have to chip away on smaller stages that don't really pay well enough for me to be able to afford to pay the band enough for them to take time off work and loved ones and come travel the country with me. It's a big ask, so until the time comes when I can afford to pay them what they deserve I'll continue to keep on keeping on in a solo capacity and hopefully bring the band out for special gigs that are worth while. I do love playing with the band and feel very fortunate to have some very talented people who are willing to play on my records and on stage. But yes, I think I've had to learn how to adapt and deliver songs on different levels for different occasions. And I think that after recording four albums and having another four already mapped out I have enough material to be able to cater for different audiences without sacrificing my identity. I mean I have opened up for a pretty wide range of people over the years from John Cale to Richard Hawley, Kristin Hersh, The Handsome Family, Willard Grant Conspiracy, William Elliott Whitmore and Billy Joe Shaver to bands like The Stranglers and Wishbone Ash for crying out loud. I guess

that there was something of relevance in me to all of those acts no matter how disparate they may be.

I enjoy playing both solo and with a band for different reasons but yeah, I do wish that I could take the band out more often (especially the three guys that I'm working with live right now. I couldn't wish for a nicer bunch of boys. And I'm not just saying that. It can be very difficult to get that chemistry right and actually enjoy each others company and working together)

**YOU BASED PRESCOTT'S CONFESSION ON AN 1833 TEXT YOU CAME ACROSS ENTITLED PRESCOTT'S CONFESSION OF THE MURDER OF SALLY COCHRAN (BY A PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL AT THE BAR) . DOES THAT SENSE OF GIVE NEW LIFE TO AN OLD PIECE OF WORK APPEAL TO YOU?**

Yes, I suppose so. It was the first time that I'd ever attempted such a thing (unless you count me and my brother making up melodies from that Elvis book when we were kids) and I have absolutely no idea what the original melody may have sounded like. It appealed to me because it just slotted into place like it was meant to be. I had become pretty obsessed with the Murder Ballads on 'The Harry Smith Anthology of American Folk Music' so my girlfriend bought me a rare book called 'American Murder Ballads and their stories' for Christmas a couple of years back. I had been writing several new murder ballads of my own that particular week when I came up with a repetitive banjo pattern. I literally just opened the book, it fell on that page and I started singing Prescott's Confession. It just worked straight away so I stuck with it.

Since then I have looked back to some older sources for inspiration. When I worked with Victoria Williams up in the mountains outside Aberystwyth, she would to often dip into the book 'Redemption Songs' 1000 Hymns & Choruses - as I guess people like Johnny Cash and others have done too. Yes, it is a very religious book but the way things are written just flow so easily in song and I have drawn the odd line here and there to spark off brand new songs.

I do like the idea of reinterpreting songs that you've never heard before. Very much like Billy Bragg and Wilco did with those old Woody Guthrie song lyrics. Most of the Murder Ballads in that book are very old and unrecorded but I think I need to take a break from the Murder ballads for a while now.

**DESPITE THE SENSE OF DARKNESS IN THE MATERIAL YOU HAVE ALSO GIVEN THEM A SENSE OF HOPE AND LIFE IF ONLY IN THE WAY THAT YOU BRING A LIFE AFFIRMING ENERGY TO THE SONGS. IS THAT YOUR ATTENTION?**

Absolutely! I think that people should see something life affirming in all those tales of death and destruction. Even if it is just to realise how precious, fragile and beautiful life is. And perhaps try to appreciate it a little more and not take it for granted so much. It's often overlooked in a lot of my material but even going back to my first album 'The Sweetest Ache' and all the dark orchestral drama that happens there I always try to inject a thread of resilient hope and optimism into the songs no matter how bleak or intense they may sound.

I regard myself as a cynical optimist. Someone who is prepared for the worst but always hoping for the best. I suppose it's not a bad disposition to have really.





**YOU HAVE RUN YOUR OWN LABEL RATHER THAN SIT AROUND AWAITING FOR THE BIG LABEL TO COME KNOCKING, HOWEVER GIVEN THE WAY THE INDUSTRY HAS GONE. DO YOU FEEL THAT YOUR BETTER OFF CONTROLLING YOUR OWN DESTINY?**

Well there are pros and cons on both sides really. Running my own label is a necessity for me right now to get my music out there and try to build a career but I can't really begin to compete on the same level as bigger independents or major labels. Money talks especially in terms of marketing and even though I have probably received more airplay, press exposure and live touring activity with this new album 'Devil's Bridge' than I have previously I'm still taking very small steps towards sustaining myself in the long term. In some ways I would love someone to come along and put me onto the fast track towards reaching a much bigger audience but I think I would find it very difficult to let go and not be 100% in control. Controlling your own destiny is fine as long as you have a good idea of what that destiny should be. It's easy to be the captain of a rudderless boat and just drift aimlessly. So you have to dig pretty deep inside to keep motivating yourself everyday to move forward in the right direction as a business man as well as a musician and song writer. Finding a comfortable balance between the two is the hardest part. The business part is a necessary evil but can suck a lot of your creative energy away from you if you're not careful. That's why I go away to record in the mountains to refresh and reinvigorate my love for song writing without the distractions of city life. It seems to work for me. That's really the most rewarding and fun part for me and reminds me why I began making music and writing songs to begin with. Somehow it makes all the frustration and disappointment worthwhile. When you know that you have something good, something that you believe in, even if nobody else has ever heard it, it's a pretty amazing feeling. If you make music for music's sake and for what it gives you as an artist in that moment then you are a true artist. And nothing and nobody can take that away from you.

**I DON'T KNOW ANY ARTIST WHO WOULDN'T LIKE TO SELL MORE OF THEIR MUSIC IF FOR NO OTHER OTHER REASON THAN TO FUND FUTURE MUSIC. HOW DO YOU BALANCE THOSE NEEDS, DO YOU NEED TO DO ANYTHING OTHER THAN BEING A MUSICIAN TO KEEP GOING?**

Of course I would like to sell more albums and reach a much bigger audience. I want people to hear the music that I have invested so much time and effort and passion in making. I guess I write for myself but perform for a audience and hope that the audience will also get something out of it.

Yes, increased sales would also help to ensure that I can continue to release new music, continue to develop as a 'recording artist' and live a decent life. It can be somewhat soul destroying and demoralising travelling miles to play your heart out to small crowds for very little or no money but the 9 to 5 alternative can be even more devastating. I did work the office life for a short while but despite the hardships that I may have to face financially and personally I console myself in the fact that I am doing what I love. And there is a lot to be said for that.

#### RED EYE MUSIC IS YOUR LABEL. DO YOU RELEASE OTHER ARTISTS THROUGH RED EYE?

Yes, Red Eye Music has released 11 albums since it was formed in 2003. I originally set the label up with jazz pianist Dave Stapleton and we released several of his projects including an improvised avant garde group called Full Circle, The Conway Suite with Deri Roberts, 2 of Dave's Quartet albums and a double live album by UK jazz legend Keith Tippett. Obviously my four albums have come out through Red Eye as well as a fantastic solo album by Michael J Sheehy called Ghost On The Motorway. Dave and I parted company last year as he wanted to set up his own jazz specific label called Edition Records, so I let him take with the rights to all his jazz titles with him. Michael has just released another amazing album called 'With These Hands' which came out through Glitterhouse Records so I am at a stage right now where I do need to rebuild the catalogue of the label and find new or established artists to work with. But I need to feel very passionate about an artist and their music before I am going to invest my time, effort and money into them. And that's much easier said than done. But I'm cynically optimistic!

#### IS IT DIFFICULT FOR AN INDEPENDENT ARTIST, WITH GOOD CRITICAL REVIEWS, TO GET BEYOND CULT STATUS?

Well, someone please tell me! Answers on a postcard to the usual address. I'm not the person to ask as far as that's concerned. I guess it's about reaching that point of critical mass, whether it's through slogging your guts out the hard way on the live circuit and slow building up that bigger following, or getting more and more press coverage, or getting that consistent radio support and allowing people to hear and decide for themselves. TV shows like 'Later with Jools Holland' have also been hugely powerful. Ultimately it's all about exposure and being seen and heard in all the right places. But without the power and influence of good managers, agents, labels etc I guess you have to rely on dogged hard work and persistence. There are plenty of quotes that you can console yourself in but I like this one by Calvin Coolidge, "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not. Nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not. Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not. The world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence, determination and hard work make the difference".

#### YOU MENTIONED THAT YOU WOULD LOVE TOM JONES TO COVER ONE OF YOUR SOUL SONGS. HAVE YOU ACTIVELY TRIED TO MAKE THAT HAPPEN?

Not exactly no. I did interview Tom once for a newspaper in Wales and loved talking to him. He was just like a regular Welsh bloke telling stories down the pub. It's just that Tom's stories involved people like Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis and Howlin' Wolf. I was fascinated but I think I want to release those soul songs myself first and attempt to realise my vision for them before approaching him again. Again though it would be useful if I had a publisher with good connections to put the songs into the right hands.

#### SOUL MUSIC IS PART OF YOUR CANNON AND YOU HAVE SAID YOU WOULD LOVE TO RECORD WITH MAVIS

#### STAPLES. HAVE YOU THOUGHT OF CHANGING DIRECTION AND DOING A SOUL ALBUM - IT WOULD SEEM TO BE A MORE MEDIA FRIENDLY ROUTE THAN AMERICANA IS AT THE MOMENT?

Yes, I am currently working on that soul album but like I said before I wouldn't necessarily regard it as a dramatic change of direction. I've always considered myself a soul artist whether I'm singing country, blues, folk, gospel or rock. I find it hard to sing without putting my heart and soul into it.

A good song is a good song whether you dress it up with horns and strings or just play it alone on a banjo. But I do have a good batch of songs that to me are crying out for those horns and string parts. The song is king and you just have to serve the song as best you can. Those songs will take longer to finish than others and I'm hoping to record those horn parts in Austin, Texas before SXSW in March next year. So I'm just trying to get everything else ready before then. Another album might well be released before then because it's quicker for me to complete but it is in the pipeline.

#### THE BANJO IS CENTRAL TO YOUR MUSIC WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THE INSTRUMENT?

I think it's something to do with how startlingly commanding it can be. It's such a bright and penetrating instrument and I find it to be an incredibly energising instrument to write on. You get a very immediate response to the strings and the skin. The rhythms and melodies that it often dictates with my finger picking styles are also much more upbeat and vibrant than when I generally write on the guitar. I must confess though that it was David Eugene Edwards and 16 Horsepower that first really attracted my interest in the instrument. Before that, like many people I probably only really associated it with Deliverance and the 'Dueling banjo's'. But there was something darker still in the way that 16 Horsepower used the instrument in their more gothic take on country and rock music that I found compelling. And through them I began to seek out other banjo music like The Kossoy Sisters, The Stanley Brothers, Bill Monroe, Pete Seeger and all those Harry Smith Anthology gems.

I had already been playing steel guitar in open G tuning so when I first picked up the Banjo it felt like a pretty natural transition for me. I've still got an awful long way to go as a player but I love the happy accidents that occur in the writing process when I'm playing banjo.

#### YOU HAVE VISITED AMERICA, TOURING TO SEE PLACES LIKE SUN STUDIOS. DID YOU GET THE OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY THERE? IF SO HOW DID THAT GO DOWN - A WELSHMAN BRING HIS MUSIC TO THE PLACE WHERE IT IS MOST PLAYED?

Yes, I've played in America several times now. I've showcased at SXSW in Austin for the last two years and have had a very positive response. I actually started out performing in America and did my first ever solo show in a coffee shop on Haight Ashbury in San Francisco when I was travelling around America after I graduated from University. I didn't play or record in Sun Studios but I did find the place incredibly inspiring. I was literally trembling when I walked through those doors and into that small back room where it all happened. I

have an awful lot of reverence for the artists and the music that came out of there so it was a huge thing for me. I wanted to just sit outside the place for hours just to try and absorb all those vibrations.

As far as being a Welshman playing very American influenced music goes well it's a strange thing because as you mentioned earlier everything goes around in cycles. The argument about whether it's OK for a UK artist to play blues or country or any so called American style music is nonsense as long as it's done well and with some kind of authentic conviction and sincerity. But there is still a big stigma attached to it especially here in the UK. I don't think American's actually object to it as much as the UK media does. This argument has gone on for decades now since Rock'n'Roll first exploded in Britain in the 50's. It happened with The Rolling Stones and countless others. But it does bother me that there is more of a stigma attached to anyone singing country music or blues above all of the bad indie rock bands that emerged entirely inspired by The Pixies or Pavement or Grunge or whatever. Once again a good song is a good song no matter where it came from.

**ASIDE FROM THE AFOREMENTIONED JOHN CALE, YOU ARE ON RECORD AS BEING A FAN OF SINGULAR ARTISTS LIKE TOWNES VAN ZANDT AND BILLY JOE SHAVER. THESE ARE ALL, CRITICALLY PRAISED, BUT STILL CULT ARTISTS. IS THE BODY OF WORK THAT THEY HAVE ACHIEVED ENOUGH?**

As a fan it's enough for me to appreciate and love their music and song writing brilliance for what it's worth. But whether it's enough for them depends on what they wanted and expected from their career. I think that there may have been something self sabotaging in both Townes and Billy Joe that prevented them achieving more commercial success. I was lucky enough to open for Billy Joe Shaver three times last year and had a chance to chat and hear some great stories. He clearly didn't want to play by the rules in Nashville and made a pretty good job of screwing it up several times through boozing and brawling. The body of work that Townes produced and the songs that he wrote in phenomenal. And it will continue to live on as other artists continue to reinterpret and discover those songs.

I guess if you're a real fan of the music it doesn't matter how successful they may or may not have been. Just look at all those old delta blues guys like Junior Kimbrough, RL Burnside or T Model Ford who didn't even find any kind of success until they were in there 60's. Success is a subjective thing.

**IN THAT LIGHT WHERE WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR MUSIC TO BE AND HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED IN 10 YEARS TIME?**

Remembered? In 10 years? God, that sounds like your asking me for a memorial.

Like I say, success is a very subjective thing, and I can talk about the true value of music for music's sake and being a true artist and all that, but somehow you have to survive and eat and have somewhere to sleep and try to live a happy life. There are an awful lot of sacrifices that must be made in order to follow the path of being an artist even if you think that there may be riches and rewards just around the corner. You don't have to be tortured to be a great artist but the whole journey does place certain strains on you. My aims have

always been to keep making the best records I possibly can and try to reach as big an audience as I possibly can. And I'll continue to do just that. Yes, of course I'd like to be more financially secure and be able to perform on a much bigger level. But those are egotistic desires.

In ten years time I hope I'll still be alive and kicking and making the best music of my life. If I'm not around in 10 years time then I hope that my music will be fondly embraced by a loving audience and I'll be remembered as someone who was true to themselves and had the courage of his convictions. But I'm not done yet. As they say, there's plenty of life in the old dog yet!!





# KIMMIE RHODES LOVE AND HAPPINESS

KIMMIE RHODES IS ONE OF THE MOST TALENTED, DELIGHTFUL AND HARDWORKING PEOPLE EVER. SHE IS A SONGWRITER, SINGER, PLAYWRIGHT, COOKBOOK AUTHOR, PROFESSIONAL FLORIST, ACTRESS, PAINTER – THE LIST JUST GOES ON. WHAT IS MORE REMARKABLE SHE ACCOMPLISHES ALL THIS WITHOUT APPARENT STRAIN, JUGGLING A HECTIC TOURING SCHEDULE WHILE CONTINUING TO CREATE MUSIC, PLAYS AND PAINTINGS.

KIMMIE WAS RAISED IN LUBBOCK, HOME OF BUDDY HOLLY AND THE FLATLANDERS AND MUSICAL BASE OF, AMONG OTHERS, KIMMIE'S COLLABORATOR WAYLON JENNINGS. SHE BEGAN PERFORMING AS PART OF A FAMILY GOSPEL TRIO AGED 6 AND HAS BASICALLY NEVER STOPPED. WILLIE NELSON, WITH WHOM KIMMIE MADE A DUET ALBUM PICTURE IN A FRAME, REFERS TO KIMMIE AS AN 'UNDISCOVERED SUPERSTAR'. HER SONGS HAVE BEEN COVERED BY WYNONNA, MARK KNOPFLER, TRISHA YEARWOOD, KIMMIE'S CO-WRITERS EMMY LOU HARRIS, WILLIE NELSON AND WAYLON JENNINGS, AMY GRANT AND JOE ELY AMONG OTHERS. HER THREE PLAYS HAVE BEEN PRODUCED AND ONE OF THEM GAVE RISE TO KIMMIE'S SMALL TOWN GIRL ALBUM – SHE SAT DOWN TO WRITE A SONG AND THE ALBUM AND THE PLAY JUST HAPPENED.

KIMMIE TOURS EXTENSIVELY AND HAS VISITED IRELAND MANY TIMES, ON OCCASION TOURING WITH KEIRAN GOSS, WITH WHOM SHE HAS ALSO CO-WRITTEN.



### WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO GET OUT OF WRITING A SONG?

I often say that songwriting is like a form of math. Like algebra, you have an equation and you begin to work that out. I've written songs in a lot of different ways for a lot of different reasons but the real heart of why and what I write is similar to what happens when you wake up from a dream and you remember the feeling, if not the detail of the dream. I have a piece of paper and a guitar. Then through the math of language, of poetry and sound, I can underscore the way I feel with the music. You have verses, choruses and bridges all the components of a song. I can then put into words how I feel. I don't always write songs from top to bottom. A lot of times I'll be driving, or whatever, and I'll get an idea and I'll make a note. I've learned how to trap that little snippet and work with it later. For instance I was <http://www.rte.ie/news/morningireland/images/listen-header.jpg> in the airport once when (she sings a small piece of melody and lyric) *I'm Gonna Fly* came and because we were delayed in London for hours it was on my mind. It was a little moment. I hold these little pieces until more information comes or I get the time to sit down and focus and let it come through.

### DO YOU WRITE NOTES OR JUST RELY ON MEMORY?

Sometimes I remember them but I've lost some good things by not writing them down. I tend to have loads of little books and small scraps of paper; receipts, backs of cheques, envelopes. I hang on to them and then I sit down and process them. Sometimes it takes a good while for the rest of the idea to come, it's really more of a breaking-it-down process than actually making it up. The pieces can, on occasion, fall together. Right now I'm in, what I call, "sponge mode". I don't have the time to do anything but soak things in. I've been on the road and there has been so much going on in my life that when I get the chance to slow down I usually go to sleep. Sometimes I write in my sleep, I don't have to be awake. It's a consciousness' thing, it just comes through when it wants to. I find when I do actually sit down to write that the information is all there. It's a case of working the algebra and editing it.

### DOES IT DIFFER FROM WRITING A PLAY?

Well the first play I wrote came from sitting down to write a song called Small Town Girl. It was going to be sort of autobiographical song about my life when I was a kid. The characters in it were from that time and I had such a backlog of information from then. I had this period where I had lots of time on my hands as my husband was working on a session and they were going off to the studio for hours. I sat down to write this song but ended up with thirteen and the story. I didn't know what I had, there was this story. I didn't really care as I was so overjoyed with what came out. I was just doing it for the enjoyment of doing it! It turned out to be a play. I did it in a workshop and staged it a couple of times with a guy named Joe Sears from Austin who is a really good professional playwright and an actor. Sometimes I realise that I have something a little bit bigger than just a song. I kinda know when that's coming. I wrote another one later called *Windblown* and I did one for fun, for the heck of it, out at Willie's called *Hillbilly Heaven*. It used our friends as these wacky country music characters. We even had God in it (*laughs*). We had this guy called TJ Mc Farland in it who was the only really true giant I have ever known, so his character was written in, we had fun doing it.

When I did *Windblown* I had all these dancers, all this different stuff and I wasn't sure what I was trying to say. Well, I did but I wasn't sure what the end was though. When we finally got it on the stage and we had a little band over at the side, sometimes I would go over and be in the band and sometimes I'd jump in the picture. When I looked over and saw everyone I kinda thought that these people have gone to all this trouble so that I could know what I thought. It was an amazing thing. It's an amazing medium to work your way through to some sort of closure or final thought.

### CAN YOU THEN TURN THAT PROCESS INTO A SERIES OF SONGS?

What happens is you do these things and you learn about your process. Like when I first started painting pictures I did this whole series of paintings over a couple of years. I realised after I'd hung them that there was this little window in the corner of each of them and it moved around until in the very last painting it had become this painting of a big window. I thought 'that's really what happens to me in the creative process'. Right now I'm half way through a record, but in my mind I've moved on to the next one. I have all these bits and I have to find out where they all fit. I have this idea that I'm working on called "dreams of flying" and I've actually conceived the artwork at this point more than the songs. I trust myself that it all going to come together. I try not to over-think or talk it away. Every once in a while you find a song from the past that just happens to fit, one that hasn't found its place before that. When I did *Walls Fall Down* I had some songs I thought I was going to do, but they didn't end up on the record. Musically there was a continuity to *Walls Fall Down*. I'd got the songs together and recorded way more that were needed but I used the same band within the same four day period. We were all living and eating together and we weren't working too hard every day. We just cut four or five songs, mostly the first take, so there was this spirit to the music and we were just having fun. Friends like Kieran Goss and Annie Kinsella were there. My friend John Gardner had come down from Nashville and a guy that he had played with in the Dixie Chicks, Glen Fukunaga. They work together with the Chicks as a rhythm section and then there was Brian Standefer who plays cello with Alejandro Escovedo, and he came out and he was just brilliant. There was a continuity, a musical thread that ran through whatever I had to say. It was, in some ways, more of a political statement than I usually make.

### RONNIE: WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO RECORD THE COVERS OF FOOL ON THE HILL, IF I NEEDED YOU AND SEX AND GASOLINE FOR WALLS FALL DOWN?

It wasn't premeditated at all. *Sex And Gasoline* was because Rodney and I were doing a Bluebird Cafe show and he sat in and played that on guitar and I said to him that it was an incredible song and made such a statement. It's the kind of song that not been written a lot. I wanted to that song and then I wrote *Walls Fall Down* and I thought that what the world needs is fewer walls. They'd been talking about building a wall between Texas and Mexico. It is the most unlikely thing you could ever do. I thought that we had all these walls, the Berlin Wall, and these walls never work. They're just a bad idea, like building up personal walls. But it wasn't any specific wall it was walls in general. So that was like a personal/political statement. I wrote *Your Majesty* then, and obviously, I was thinking about George W Bush when I wrote that, about rulers



who don't rule for the common good but rather for their own personal reasons. And though I don't usually make such statements with my music some of that fell in. Then it was (Kimmie's son and producer) Gabe's idea to do Fool On The Hill. He'd heard the song and got a flash that it would work. I'd have never thought of that in a million years. I went "wow, really" and he said "Yeah. it'd be really good" and so I could see that he had a vision about it and we did it because I really trust his instinct and I loved the song. I said as long as we don't do it like the Beatles and he said "Oh No, it won't be that way at all". So I said "you're in charge I'll just sing". He did a great job as he had it all worked out. He had this really light magical touch with it. It was done in one take, We had the perfect band to do it. With If I Needed You I had always done that song in my show but I thought that we didn't need yet another version of it in the world. I usually have more songs that I need to try and get on the record, but I thought "why not" as we had this atmosphere in the studio. As it's our studio we aren't under any financial obligation with time, you're not working by the hour, so we cut it and I just loved it. I don't know why I'm so dense about doing things because I can't tell who how many times people have come to me and asked me "which CD is that song on". Now when I do it people can have it. As a writer, where I come from, Townes raised the bar for everyone. He wasn't destined for the commercial world, there are a lot of successful writers who weren't a patch on Townes, and they'd probably say the same thing. As far as commercial success, it has to do with who you are and where you are and how much you're willing to hustle and to network. Townes was just a pure poet and artist he wasn't going to slap hands and do that hustle.

*WHAT IS IT ABOUT TEXAS THAT TURNS OUT SUCH STRONG SONGWRITER/POETS?*

We're sitting in the Seamus Ennis Centre and Ireland is also a place like that. When you live in a place that's kinda wild and that has an edge to it... there's a lot of people from Lubbock... I was talking to The Flatlanders the other day and we were talking about how everything from Lubbock has this edge, because of the terrain, the weather and the whole culture. Even Christmas Day has a edge to it. There's no time you ever lose that buzz. It's so hard to describe. We all grew up in a time period when we had Buddy Holly, the Beatles and rock 'n' roll starting up. Were from that generation where we had a lot of influences, including country music. You get the same edge with Joe Ely as you get with Waylon Jennings. It's just a cultural thing and an environmental thing.

*SO THE TRADITION FOSTERS THAT GOING FORWARD?*

Absolutely, that's the next point I was going to make. You get people hanging out together. Take it out of this context. Look at Impressionist painters as another example. You get a group of people who come together in a moment in time where there's some competition, but a lot of support and then a whole school begins to happen where people would encourage each other. In that way you can't wait to play them your new song and try to outdo them. That why I say Townes raised the bar. He was such a pure poet because it came through his soul and he was trying to process, I guess, what was a lot of sadness, happiness and whatever. He was a very sensitive receptor and I never saw him dumbing down commercially to try and get anything. He just trusted people



to get it. And they did. A poet won't actually spell things out, he wants you to get in there and engage. So much commercial music now is not engaging in a lot of ways. You have to be able to get in there and relate to it and figure it out. People now, with thing like television or food, they want to get it immediately. They don't want to have to think about it. But intellectually there are people who do want to explore and figure it out. One of the more successful songs I wrote was called West Texas Heaven. If you ask ten different people what that song means each of the ten would say something different. It's just loose enough, with enough imagery, enough emotional whatever that people can get in there and fill in the blanks. Then it becomes their story, their song. That's the success of a lot of the Beatles songs. They had enough in the lyrics that meant something to them but that wasn't telling people what to think, but allowed them to use their imagination, to participate.

*WITH THESE WRITERS THERE IS ALSO A SENSE OF DIFFERENCE. IN THE MAINSTREAM HAS IT ALL BECOME HOMOGENIZED?*

It's a different culture. Texas is a long way from Tennessee. They are almost separate countries. In Nashville when they started to make records the publishers were already based there as they were there to print bibles. The presses were there when they wanted to print sheet music. So the publishing business built up around what was already there. When they started making records you had the Appalachian mountains all around and a lot of bluegrass music came from there. In Texas you had the blues, a lot of amazing black artists whose parents or grandparents were slaves. And there this whole other thing; we border on Mexico and there's a German influence. There's Louisiana with French influences. So there are different cultures, different instruments. It all melds itself into a different thing. Nashville already had something in place that was commercial that Texas did not have. We had cattle and cowboy songs so if Nashville is an apple Texas is an orange. Just as in New York you had jazz which came up from New Orleans. We had some of that in Texas with Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. When exploration and transportation connected things up everything, including music, began to become more of one thing. In New York, Nashville and Los Angeles you have these industries intact that are collecting music from places like Seattle which becomes something that's more homogeneous. The record companies and radio stations, which used to play music that they liked, began to have money attached and music started to become something like bread. So the good wholesome bread becomes long packages of white stuff that doesn't get old for two months. Basic economics applied to a cultural thing. They try to get something that is commercial but doesn't have anything to do with where it all started. It became lucrative and people with money began to invest in it and they want to tell you what to do.

*IS THE WESTERN SWING THING STILL BIG IN TEXAS?*

Absolutely, there are small dancehalls all over Texas where people go, traditional places that each generation rediscovers. Ray Benson, to his credit, continues to do it with Asleep At The Wheel and Willie does it. George Strait was one of the few that could get some real big commercial success doing some Texas Swing. I know bands that are still doing that in small Texas dancehalls whom George Strait used to open for.



*DO YOU THINK THE LABEL OF "COUNTRY MUSIC" IS A NEGATIVE FOR ARTISTS IN EUROPE?*

Tell me about it (laughs)! My friend Marcia Ball, who is a blues pianist, she started out in a country band and she said that being perceived as a country artist was like being perceived as an axe murderer, but that's it's easier to get over being an axe murderer (laughs). I mean I've had cuts by Wynona Judd and Willie Nelson and I have done some country records. In the seventies with the whole Austin scene we were just rediscovering Emmylou and Gram Parsons, The Band and Bob Dylan. Dylan had made Nashville Skyline. It was a trend. I'd written some country songs and I'd had some success with them, but it makes it hard for the other stuff to come forward. Through the years I've just gone ahead and done what I was going to do and eventually people, who may have moved away when I moved on, start to come back because they started to get it. It's just songs and it's more interesting than if you just do the same thing over and over. There are only two kind of music, good and bad.

What I love about U2, as we were listening to their hits CD in the car, is that often become more about the beat with an uptempo song but with U2 I love that there's content to the lyric. To me it's got everything you want in a song.

To me it's about growing and the day I don't have anything to say in my work I'll go and do some other kind of art. For example; look at Willie. I can use him as an example 'cause I know him, he's got a huge body of work, he's been so prolific and made so many records. I'm constantly amazed how the wheels in his mind are always turning.

He never stops growing. He always wants to try something different. I actually did a Snoop Dogg commercial with Willie a couple of months ago. Willie was basically rappin' to this melody. I looked at him and said to him that "it's really just *Smoke, Smoke, Smoke That Cigarette* all over again". He was really good at it as he'd done that kinda thing already. I know cause we'd recorded *Smoke, Smoke, Smoke That Cigarette* with him. That's kinda a first rap style song if you think about it.

#### *TELL US ABOUT PEOPLE YOU HAVE COLLABORATED WITH OVER THE YEARS.*

When I first started writing songs I was writing alone, then I started writing with a group of people where we just passed the piece of paper around. On my very first record there were some collaborations. Then I got more serious and I didn't want anybody bothering me. I got real personal about it and all the songs on *West Texas Heaven* I'd written by myself. I started having some success with my songs and I was with a publisher and they were interested to see what I'd come up with if I worked with other people. At that point I was kind of close-minded about it as I thought "Whoa, that's like asking me to take off my clothes in front of someone", because I was so stripped down personally when I wrote. I felt I could reveal things to myself but no one else. There was this guy called Jim Rushing, who had written a lot of hits. I told him one time that he was like "Tennessee Ernie Ford on Acid" (laughs). He's real cool, really country kind of guy. He'd written all these beautiful songs, including one for Garth Brooks, so I was supposed to go write with him and I was new to town. They'd thought "let's put these two together as they're both such hayseeds". I went over to his house, I was thinking of making an excuse and canceling but I went and I said "I'm sorry as there are so many people in this town who would give anything to be able to have the privilege of coming over to write with you but, honestly I can't imagine sitting down and just blurting out some thing ". I could do that now in a second but at the time that was where my head was at. He said "Well that's fine. Let me make you a cup of coffee". He asked me where was I from and I said "I'm from Lubbock" and he said "I'm from Lubbock, what street did you live on?" It turned out that we had lived across the alley from each other and that our mothers had worked at the telephone company together. So in about four sentences we have all this stuff in common and I was on the phone to my Mom and she was like "Sybil Rushing!". We wrote one song that day because I felt "now I can do this". We wrote a lot of songs together but none of them ever had any real commercial success. They were really sweet good songs and they might happen yet. We wrote a song called *Separate Lives On Parallel Streets* about living close to each other without knowing each other. That taught me something about collaborating and I opened my mind after that. I've done all sorts of wonderful collaborations with people I've met. A girl I met in London just grabbed up a napkin and start scoring like I'd start to write a line. It's been amazing. I even co-wrote with this girl, E.G. Daily who was one of the voices in *Rugrats*. I wrote with her over the phone. I never even met her. I had a song I wrote by myself in *Babe - Pig In The City*. Wacky things have happened. I've learned that collaborations are a blast. Sometimes you get something and sometimes you don't. You learn to not get emotional invested in whether you're getting something big and important. You just go and make up a song - it doesn't hurt anybody.

#### *LOVE AND HAPPINESS WAS SOMETHING OF AN ACCIDENT WASN'T IT?*

Actually Emmylou and I had met, The first time I really got to know her was when we did an *Austin City Limits* show with Rodney Crowell and Willie. I'd written a song called *Hard Promises* that she liked. She had liked the *West Texas Heaven* album when it came out and that song was on it. Then we ended up being with the same publisher and she wanted to write and I wanted to write with her so we got together and we wrote a song called *Ordinary Heart* that was in a movie called *Happy Texas*. We were going to get together to write one time but I had got snowed in a house in Nashville and Gary Nicholson had put my baby Gibson guitar into open D tuning and left it there so I'd picked it up and started to play without any idea of what I was going to do. I started to make up a melody and when the snow thawed I went over to Emmylou's and it just clicked. As it does some days and we wrote *Love And Happiness*. With Waylon one day we wrote a song called Lines and it's a song about why we write songs. There's nothing more uncomfortable than sitting down to write and nothing is coming. As artist you are what you are, I mean you can grow but you are still what you are. I was talking to Harlan Howard one time he'd said to me "You people from Texas are really deep, and write really deep songs. I like to write songs for the hit parade" (laughs). I knew exactly what he meant. To me that was a compliment. He wrote some amazing songs and he had such a great sense of humour. Willie's kinda somewhere in between that. When you're writing in Nashville and someone says lets do a three way you say "ok but one of you better be really good at making coffee" (laughs). I wrote a song with Benmont Tench and Gary Nicholson and Gary Will "I'll make the coffee" but he still made a real contribution to the song. You just throw stuff out there and sometimes it just takes off. You might be the one who made the coffee and then just throw something in that can make a difference. Your contribution still matters. That's kinda where I am now as I've worked a lot in Nashville and I'm still a Texas person and always will be. I never moved. I just commuted. You're built on the roots of the plant you came up from. You can grow but you're still that plant.

I came to Ireland to a songwriters' get-together. It was a gift from my friend Beth Nielson Chapman as she wasn't able to go. I was helping her get things together and she said she was going to pay me and I'd said "no you're not" and next thing she had bought me a ticket to Ireland. So she just sent me in her place. I was nervous as I didn't know anyone and felt that I was going to be thrown into it. I'm cool about co-writing but I felt it was going to be weird to show up in Ireland and not know anybody and she said "It'll be fun". I wrote a song with Ricky Warwick, I loved Ricky.

*Interview by Stephen Rapid and Ronnie Norton, intro by Sandy Harsch.  
Photography by Ronnie Norton.*





# TRACKS ON THE HIGHWAY MUSIC REVIEWS

## **Bap Kennedy** *Howl On Lonely Street*

For his latest solo album Kennedy has worked with a tight unit that consisting of, essentially, Bap himself and multi-instrumentalist Pete O'Hanlon a musician from Northern Ireland who lived and played in Nashville as well as playing with numerous Irish artists, and who released a solo album *Trick Of Time* some years ago. Steel player Percy Robinson, backing vocalist Brenda Kennedy are also featured. On the only cover song, *Hey Joe*, he is joined by Henry McCullough. The album is one of his best and will find favour with fans. The songs are memorable, focused and upbeat with subtle melodies showing Bap's voice at its best. The underlying theme of some of the songs is the Apollo space programme, including in *Irish Moon*, a tribute to astronaut Michael Collins and the oblique closing song *Ballad Of Neil Armstrong*. There is a restraint and gentle touch to these songs which suggest a man at peace with himself, a man exploring a time when the world had a sense of expectation and hopefulness. *Hey Joe* is more uptempo and is shot through with Henry McCullough's spikey and tasteful guitar playing. Kennedy makes the oft-covered song his own.

*Howl On* is arguably Kennedy's best album to date certainly one that bears repeated listening and has a cohesive thread that runs through its exploration of universal love.

## **Christopher Rees** *Devil's Bridge Red Eye Music*

Having seen Rees delivering a memorable solo support spot with The Handsome Family I was eager to check out the recorded versions of some of the songs and am happy to report that on album Rees is as compelling as he is live. I didn't expect was to be pleasantly reminded of one of my favourite bands Slim Cessna's Auto Club, who share a the same sense of spiritual fire and a deep connection to a primal folk, blues and country music's mythical roots. Rees is a multi-instrumentalist who pretty much covers all bases other than the drums, played to perfection here by Dan Tilbury. The songs are vibrant and varied running from the traditional-sounding *Hangman's Tree* that is stripped-down, stark banjo and voice death deliberation to the fiddle-driven whirlwind *Kicked Out By Love*. The full sounding closer *Worlds Fall Apart Every Day* has a solo voice choir that adds depth and emotion to its sense of an inevitable apocalypse. Christopher Rees is an undoubted talent whose music that highlights the twin forces of good and evil that exist everywhere but that, here, seems to have one foot in the Welsh Valleys and one foot in the Appalachian Mountains. As writer, producer, musician and singer Rees controls his own destiny and is a perfect example of an independent artist doing things right. What he may not be getting is the wider exposure that would help things along. That may come, but right here and now *Devil's Bridge*, his fourth album, which has been described as a "potent cocktail of menacing murder blues, tremulous rockabilly and intoxicating country" is a testament a ready and raw talent. Visit [www.christopherrees.co.uk](http://www.christopherrees.co.uk) where you can listen to tracks from the album and judge for yourselves.

## **David Serby** *Honkytonk and Vine Harbor Groove*

Serby is a West Coast country roots musician who regards Dave Alvin and Dwight Yoakam as twin beacons of California country music. Between those two towering influences and those who influenced Alvin and Yoakam themselves you will a patch of ground staked out by David Serby. For his third album Serby again teams up with producer Edward Tree and a fine bunch of players from the West Coast scene which include Yoakam alumni - bassist Taras Prodaniuk, keyboard and accordion player Skip Edwards, as well as former Dave Alvin band member Rick Shea and notables such as pedal steel player Jay Dee Maness. This album finds Serby coming of age with a set of heartfelt self-written honky tonk and country-soul songs. Serby's voice is a lightish tenor with a distinctive nasal quality to be found in a lot of hard country singers. While he might not have the edge of bitterness and meaningful insights of heroes in his writing Serby doesn't lack feeling for life or a sense of humour or life which makes his music work in the way that Buck Owens' did. This has always proved to be the music of choice on the honky tonk dancefloor. Serby undoubtedly has country music in his veins and mixes in with all the other influences he has had in music through the years to the point where what he writes and sings feels like a contemporary take on the classic West Coast country tradition rather than some vague pop/rock crossover. The songs speak for themselves with titles like *Honky Tonk Affair*, *Country Club Couples*, *I Only Smoke When I'm Drinkin'* and *The Heartaches On The Other Sleeve* they are songs written around conversation and from observation, notes written on scraps of paper and later turned into songs. If you have ever loved Yoakam, Owens or latter day Rick Nelson then you will find much to enjoy. [www.davidserby.com](http://www.davidserby.com)

## **Sergio Webb** *Bolivar Blues Self-Release*

This latest album from Sergio Webb continues to show his growing skills as writer, musician and singer. Produced by Gail Davies' husband Rob Price in their Little Chickadee Studio in Nashville it has a great deal of warmth and charm. It is a low key and relaxed affair that isn't trying to make any specific statement. The album opens with the title track, a song Webb has co-written with fellow sideman Thomm Jutz, which is followed by *Covington Girl*, a banjo-led acoustic song that makes the most of Webb light voice. This is turn followed by a captivating take on *The Other Side Of This Life*, Fred Neil song that features Chris Scruggs on steel guitar. Another cover Dave Davies' *Death Of A Clown* where Webb's fragile vocals add to the poignancy of the song's theme. The bluesy riff-laden *Spider On The Wall*, a song co-written with John Hadley features David Olney on blues harp. *Eastern Steamship Line* has a some accordion from Bruce Baxter which is central to the musical feel of the song alongside some steel and fiddle from Teddy Jones. Webb credits Gail Davies' amazing voice, she adds harmonies throughout. Webb's former bandmate Pinto Bennett's song *One Bar Town* is given a resigned reading suited to the subject matter. One of the album highlights is *In The Time* another song where the vocals perfectly suit the song, co-written this time with Tony McLoughlin, and while no one would claim that Sergio has the vocal prowess of many of the singer/songwriters that he has ably supported he has developed that aspect of his solo career with each release. It has a nice overall feel of a music for the love of music right down to the rough card and letter press sleeve by Julie Sola. This is music that will raise a smile and give you the enjoyment of spending time with some real honest music.

[www.myspace.com/marksergiowebb](http://www.myspace.com/marksergiowebb)



### **John Rich Son Of A Preacher Man HumpHead**

Now here's a man with opinions. A member of the Music Mafia in Nashville John Rich has had some success as part of the duo Big and Rich. He now delivers his second solo album. It is a big production sound that still manages a high quotient of country sounds - you still can hear fiddle and steel over the upfront drums and guitars. Rich has a strong voice which is well to the fore on what is a thoroughly contemporary country album - with all the positive and negative aspects that that brings. However John Rich will also be noted for his specific take on America. This is a "love it or leave it" attitude that can lead to an unquestioning stance that can allow unpalatable things to go on. You can applaud his supposed working man's stance and support for home industry on *Shutting Detroit Down* on one level but there is never a simple solution. Steve Earle he ain't. The production is from Rich himself, as are the songs, many written with Vicky McGehee, some with country veteran John D. Anderson. The single *Shutting Detroit Down* was well received. As were many of the other songs ranging from *Trucker Man*, a exhortation of one American way of life through *The Good Lord And The Man* another anthem for God and Country. There is also a song that looks at life from Rich's point of view *Everybody Wants To Be Me* as well as some more straight forward love /loss songs like *I Don't Want To Lose You* and *Another You*. More classic country in lyrical content is the closing *Drive Myself To Drink* which musically has a more adventurous big band sound, with brass, to close the album. John Rich has forged his sound and philosophy and laid it out for all to see and hear. What you feel about it is up to you.

### **Water Tower Bucket Boys Catfish On The Line WTBB**

This is a young band playing old time music

with spirit and verve on some traditional songs and a quartet of original songs thrown into the mix. Their voices blend well with harmonies abounding over their accomplished playing. Although they have a few special guests to join in now and then but essentially it's the four band members giving it loads. While there may be a current surge in this type of music right now it seems to have a wide-ranging appeal to fans not only of bluegrass and old time put also to traditional music lovers and punk rockers alike. Like punk the songs are short, sharp and to the point. The effect of their full-on acoustic assault is similar. They sound like they will be a fun night out on the strength of this album but beyond that they may have to develop their writing skills and sound to bring them to a wider audience in the way that Old Crow Medicine Show have. But on it's own merits this album does what it set out to do and gives the Water Tower Bucket Boys a souvenir of their live shows and a platform for wider exposure to their undoubted love of this primal but pertinent music that is not without it sense of humour and humanity. [www.watertowerbucketboys.com](http://www.watertowerbucketboys.com)

### **Deadstring Brothers Sao Paulo Bloodshot**

National steel guitar and voice open the proceedings with the title track before the band kicks in on with a rough-hewn blues and country rock 'n' roll ramble that takes in 60's swagger and 70's righteousness. Think Exile On Main Street or The Faces and spiced with some hot Southern rock and a touch of rock-in' country. The quartet are joined on the album by some guest keyboard, fiddle, accordion and vocals on this their best album to date. It's the kind of album that sidles up to you and asks you if want a good time. Alongside the rockin' cuts there are soulful songs like accordion tinged *Adalee* or mid-paced *It's A Shame*. The songs are mainly from singer Kurt Marschke either solo or with fellow band member Spencer Cul-

lum, who also also a couple of the songs solo. Cullum also plays some well placed pedal steel on the album. Marschke has a strong voice that gets some room to manoeuvre with songs like *Yesterday's Style* and *Always A Friend Of Mine*. Marschke also co-produced the album with Dan Currie. *Sao Paulo* is an album to get acquainted with and you'll soon learn to love with it's heart and soul lurking under it's partying exterior.

### **George Strait Twang Humphead**

Opening with an energetic Jim Lauderdale co-write of a title track George Strait gives his fans exactly what they want. This is contemporary country from a singer steeped in tradition. Strait co-produced the album with long-time producer Tony Brown and the sound is confident and twang filled. With the Strait it's all about the song choices and here there are songs from the aforementioned Lauderdale, as well as co-writes from other regular contributors such as Dean Dillon. It includes three Strait co-writes, his first since he wrote a track on his debut album. The songs are good, the playing spot-on and Strait's singing is as good as it's ever been. There are the uptempo floor-fillers like the title track, *Hot Grease And Zydeco* and the Delbert McClinton/Gary Nicholson song *Same Kind Of Crazy*. There is great Hammond organ playing on the steel-led ballad of regret that Strait has written with Bubba *Straight Out of Sight Out Of Mind*. Bubba Strait also wrote *Arkansas Dave*, a restrained but highly effective story song that emphasizes George's all round vocal ability, it also has a effective harmony vocal. *The Breath You Take* is a string-laden ballad that ticks another box. As does the Spanish language song *El Rey* which closes the album well south of the border in fine Mariachi style. *Twang* is the just the latest accomplished album from Strait, one of his best and a fine example of well-crafted country music. And it does exactly what it says on the tin.

### **Terry Penney Town That Time Forgot Lucky Penny**

This Canadian singer/songwriter is firmly rooted in the troubadour tradition writing and singing songs that observe and understand the lives of ordinary men and women whose lives may have fallen on hard times. His music comes from Buddy Holly via Steve Earle with a lot of points in between but you can chart his music from those two points. Holly is eulogized in the song *Buddy Holly Blues*. *Be A Better Man* takes the oft-written theme of striving to be that very thing, to try and understand one's failings. Penney also looks at more universal themes in songs like *Benny Brown* which tells the tale of a Newfoundland soldier killed at the Somme and to a friend who fought in the Second World War and whose service number *F13327* gives the song its title. Looking back to more innocent times is something that *Town That Time Forgot* alludes to. While friendship is considered in *My Best Friend And Me*. Penney has a good grasp on how to deliver these self-written songs, largely understated but utilizing some fine players to flesh out the songs behind his spirited vocal performances. These include noted pedal steel player Tommy Detamore. Penney himself joins in on guitars and percussion. By the way after the ten songs listed have ended three are then reprised uncredited. Penny has undoubted strengths and this album is very listenable, his problem is that he has to find a way to raise his profile above the many other talented singer/songwriters out there. It's a genre that doesn't get too much profile from mainstream media and even less so no that magazines like *No Depression* are no longer around. But you can check him out at [www.terrypenny.ca](http://www.terrypenny.ca), I think you find something to enjoy in this musician's songs and delivery.

### **Scott Warren Quick Fix Bandage Jangular Music**

This is a subtle blend of dream-folk pop and

roots music with Warren's songs full of quiet hooks and pop sensibilities. A member of Signal Hill Transmission, Warren has taken time out to record this solo album which he has co-produced with Kevin Houlihan. Warren has brought in a range of classy players to help out including bassist Taras Prodaniuk, Magic Kramer on guitar and Sean Caffey on pedal steel. The sound of the latter permeates songs like *Don't Tell Me*. Warren has a way of drawing you into the songs that float around you in a soft sonic shimmer with the likes of the positive message of *I Got Your Back*. The more full on sound of *Speed Of Sound* shows a different side to his music but the real gems here are songs like *Sign The Dotted Line* where Warren delivers his song within a perfect musical placement and a memorable chorus. There is much to acquaint yourself with here and the end result may well offer something more substantial than just a quick fix bandage. The underlying beauty of this sunbathed music is its ability to warm you. The closing track is a cover, the album's only one, of America's *Sister Golden Hair* and it provides a link between different eras but similar musical attitudes.

[www.scott-warren.com](http://www.scott-warren.com)

### **Jewel Perfectly Clear** Humphead

In the credits Jewel states that she "grew up listening to Loretta Lynn, Joni Mitchell, Merle Haggard and Bob Dylan" and that their thumbprints are on her career. She has co-produced this album with John Rich in Nashville with an A-Team crew. The instruments which include fiddle, mandolin, pedal steel and all feature prominently in the mix of what is in effect a slice of contemporary pop country which should be embraced by mainstream radio in the States. While the album may seem a side step to some of her fans it's something that Jewel has wanted to do for sometime and it feels perfectly natural to her. While it may not appeal to fans of hard core country it will make sense to those who listen to some of

the new kids on the block. Jewel has had a hand in writing all but one of the songs here, most solo, with some in partnership with Guy Chambers. Her voice is distinctive and well suited to the way the songs have been arranged and delivered. All of which make it perfectly clear where her music and mind are at the moment and she obviously hopes that she will make greater inroads into the mindset of modern country fans and radio with this well positioned collection. Doubtless if she is given radio space it will do just that.

### **Buffy Sainte-Marie Running For The Drum** Cooking Vinyl

A CD/DVD package that sees Sainte-Marie giving her music an interesting mix of ancient and modern. Drum programming shares space with powwow singing on a series of self-written songs that draw from and into Native American culture. After some full on rhythmically powerful songs a more restrained sound emerges with songs like *Little Wheel Spin And Spin* and *Too Much Is Never Enough*. Here Sainte-Marie's strong and distinctive voice is well to the fore and she sings of love, lost love and hope. *When I Had You* takes you back to another era with its jazz tinged sound. Next up *I Bet My Heart On You* features Taj Mahal on a song that has its heart in the sound of New Orleans. Then there's another direction with the 50s Sun Studio sound of the effervescent *Blue Sunday*. *America the Beautiful* see Sainte-Marie adding some new lyrics to the classic song with a subtle string arrangement which creates a striking reassessment of the song. The album closes with Sainte-Marie in familiar setting a gentle folk song, a hymn to beauty of the reservation. The accompany DVD is a documentary of her life, times and music that is well worth seeing.

**Alison Krauss Essential** Rounder/Decca  
Another collected celebration of the diverse

talent of Alison Krauss, this one is aimed in many ways at a post *Raising Sand* audience, those who picked up on her after the award winning duets with Robert Plant. It also sees her represented at her most glamorous, quite a step from the young lady featured on early covers like *I've Got That Old Feeling*. The focus here is her voice, a very recognizable instrument that is placed in an assortment of acoustic settings, some with her band Union Station some from solo albums, some songs that might be called bluegrass - her first passion, others that would not be called that but all allowing the very fine players to shine. A voice that in tandem with a selection of well chosen songs shows off her delivery and interpretation of the songs. There is not a lot else to say about this collection, long time fans will doubtless have much, or everything, here. For those looking to find out about Alison Krauss this, then, is an ideal place to start as this collection will be readily available in your local record store or online.

### **Madison Violet No Fool For Trying**

True North

A Canadian duo, Brenley MacEachern and Lisa MacIsaac, sing most of their songs in unison and perfect harmony, sounding not unlike Alison Krauss. Their lovely vocals are unforced and at times delicate. The supporting players serving the song add some textures of fiddle, banjo, accordion and lap steel over a solid yet laid back rhythm section that feels just right for the songs. The songs written by the duo are literate, telling tales of conjure images of lives lived, of lives passed on and of all the possibilities in between. *The Woodshop* a song about the death of a loved one is a subtle look at grief with a underplayed backing that features some poignant accordion playing. Elsewhere the songs work with the same kind of delicate ease of touch that draws the listener into the album. MacEachern and MacIsaac make music that

need time and a certain amount of concentration to get the best from. They have undoubted strengths as writers, singers and players. They deserve wider recognition. It may not be an album that you will pick up with ease but if you go to their website [www.madisonviolet.com](http://www.madisonviolet.com) you can buy this album or the previous two there. You can check them out on youtube and really get a flavour of what they are about.

### **The Minus 5 Killingsworth** Cooking Vinyl

This collective, led by R.E.M. alumni Scott McCaughey, have released their latest album, a set of fourteen songs penned by McCaughey and featuring a host of Portland friends and neighbours who now include Richmond Fontaine's Willy Vlautin alongside long time contributor Peter Buck. The sound is that of uptempo beat group with added pedal steel and massed choruses. All of which makes for an album that has much to captivate. The slightly more restrained *Big Beat Up Moon* has acoustic guitar, steel and piano under the weary vocal and was co-written by Vlautin. It sounds good. *I Would Rather Sacrifice You* reverts back to the multi-vocal format with McCaughey sharing the mic with one of the assembled ladies from the chorus. The album doesn't give you any clues as to who plays what but that doesn't distract as it's pretty much Scott's game plan. The cover is a montage of small snapshots of Portland and the album is a set of musical snapshots that are not without humour. For instance the final song here is *Tonight You're Buying Me A Drink, Bub*. Minus 5 go into plus status with this engaging album.

### **Holly Williams Here With Me** Humphead

On her second album Holly Williams is at the heart of the album - as its main writer, co-producer, art director and designer. This time out the sound has moved a little more towards country and again the songs come from the heart. *Mama* is a testament to her mother's strength

which has given Williams an open mind and a sense of love. *I Hold On* a song featuring Chris Janson is another subtle and effective song. *A Love I Think Will Last* again features Janson, this time in a duet, on a straight up country styled song with twanging guitar and steel. It was also written with Janson and its uptempo positivity makes it an album highlight. More drum dominated is *Keep The Change*, a song written by Hilary Lindsey and Luke Laird. One of three outside songs, it sounds as if it could do well at radio. Throughout Williams delivers strong clear, committed vocals that reveal her as a singer of sensitivity and power but not one who over emotes or over sings- as so many of her contemporaries tend to. Some tracks are more produced than others *Gone With The Morning Sun* is a big power ballad.

In contrast *Without Jesus Here With Me*, a song that speaks of faith rather than religion has a less obvious accompaniment. Equally restrained is the album closer, a cover of Neil Young's *Birds* that is just voice and piano and yet is as powerful as the fuller sounding songs. Though Williams comes from a legendary family she is making music that is very much about her and who she is.

### **Stephen Fearing *The Man Who Married Music*** True North

Great title for this overview of the recent work of this acclaimed Canadian singer/songwriter. Closer to home Fearing was raised in Dublin before he returned to Canada and started his musical career.

Think Richard Thompson in terms of scope, integrity and lyrical dexterity. He is a strong singer, lyrical writer and a fine guitar player. He is also a member of Blackie and The Rodeo Kings.

Back in 1989 his album was produced by Clive Gregson, here though he has fellow Rodeo Kings member Colin Linden produce him. Steve Berlin and Fearing himself co-produces some

tracks. There are two unreleased songs added to the collection which covers studio albums as well as live recordings, taken from half a dozen albums these 15 songs give a good overview of his work. The oldest tracks here are from the 1988 album *Out To Sea* and the most recent are from *Yellowjacket* released in 2006. *From Out To Sea* comes the direct guitar and voice song *Welfare Wednesday*, which shows an understanding of the plight of those fallen on hard times. In contrast is *Anything You Want* from *Industrial Lullaby* which has a band lending moral and motivational support.

The ten minute plus *Dog On A Chain/James* medley comes from the live album *So Many Miles* and is pure storytelling, voice and guitar holding the audience's rapt attention. The title track tackles the subject of married man versus the musician and the road. The final tracks *The Big East West* and *No Dress Rehearsal* are unreleased and contrast Fearing's way of work the former is just stripped back to guitar while the latter has a band behind him for a song that makes the assertion that life is no dress rehearsal, so true Mr Fearing, so true.

### **Trace Adkins *Ten*** Capitol/Humphead

Something if a veteran these days Atkins plays his country close to the mainstream, but with an edge. There is more than a little bit of rock raunch here. But Atkins can also handle a more gentle song such as *All Is Ask For Anymore* which shows his strong, country voice off to good effect on a string driven ode to the family. *Hauling One Thing* is a good groovin' truckin' song about a trucker getting home to his lady. The humorous *Marry For Money* is again a full-on country song that opens with dobro before bringing in the full band and stompin' around, havin' a good time. *Till The Last Shot Fired* is a tribute to the American soldier that is not gung-ho, but rather considers the nature of what drives a soldier on. Written by Rob Crosby and Doug Johnson it gets a viewpoint across

without overdoing it and is done over a simple acoustic backing and ends with a choral section that is unexpected but effective. The use of a stripped down backing is used again on *I Can't Out Run You*, a song about not being able to escape the memory of a lost love. The piano and strings again underline the emotion in Atkins voice and prove that he can sing. He's not a writer and must rely on finding good songs that suit. Which he pretty much has on the twelve chosen here. A Larry Cordell co-write usually means a good song and *Sometimes A Man Needs A Drink* is no exception on the most traditional song on what is a pretty good album.

### **Little Big Town *A Place To Land*** Capitol/Humphead

Little Big Town are a two male, two female vocal quartet who have, not unexpectedly a strong, harmonious vocal sound. This, their third album refines their melodic, vocally strong country/pop sound. The foursome have written the bulk of the songs here with producer Wayne Kirkpatrick. The more acoustic songs fare better with these ears but the hits have been the fuller sounding songs. The quality of players on the album is without question. With names like Dan Dugmore, Phil Madeira, Dan Tyminski, Stuart Duncan and Ron Block how could it not be? Well the sum of these players is less than the overall sound which does exactly what it's supposed to do. It's breezy, light and pleasant and not without its fans given their chart success to date. All four handle vocals, and do so well. However there is not much grit, or dirty edges here. One of the outside songs here *Lonely Enough* comes from the pens of Jessi Alexander, Jon Randall and Darrell Brown and the simpler treatment highlights the strong harmonies and gives the lyrics a greater clarity and meaning and makes it an album highlight and point to another route that Little Big Town could take, but are

unlikely, given commercial demands, to explore fully. *Your Gonna Love Me*, has prominent pedal steel and again benefits from being and having a solo voice taking the lead. The expanded 16 track album closes with a live version of *Life In A Northern Town*, that features Sugarland and Jake Owen which I assume is the same as that on Sugarland's album.

### **Lady Antebellum *Capitol/Humphead***

This trio are high on vocal harmonies and sweet sounds. They again all have a strong vocal presence that utilises all three members as lead vocalists. They write the majority of the songs, while the production is under the guidance of veterans Victoria Shaw and Paul Worley who bring another Nashville radio friendly pop/rock/country sound to the fore. While I listened and looked for a song that would connect for me didn't find anything that hit home. Nashville seems to favour this particular blend of pop crossover, vaguely country flavoured confection that undoubtedly has its market share in America. It may well find traction and radio play on this side of the Atlantic as there is nothing that, at first listen, says "country music" but their single *I Run To You* reached the number one spot on the Country charts and the band was named best group by the Academy of Country Music, so what do I know.

### **Ben Reel *Time To Get Real*** B. Reel

Northern Ireland native Ben Reel has delivered a roots album that is full of strong songs and good playing. There's some solid keyboard playing, a rhythm section that drives things along and some very tasty guitar from Mick McCarney. Reel's voice is accompanied by welcome backing vocals that help to portray the mood of the songs. *Rainy Night* set the tone for time and place, a song that looks at what has been missed by moving away from your home town. Other topics are aging, freedom, the nature of searching and



of truth. Mature songs for a mature audience that's given a melodic and malleable musical base that could just as easily have come from the States as from Northern Ireland. Reel no doubt has taken from those who have also come from the North, such as the undeniable influence of Van Morrison as a beacon of musical innovation. Reel does not have Morrison's track record, but this is a album that shows all the signs of a true talent making his own way.

**Eric Church *Carolina* Capitol/Humphead**

Church is a singer/songwriter who fuses a rock sensibility with country roots. Producer Jay Joyce brings an edge to the project in terms of introducing sounds and stylings that give the album a fuller dimension. *Longer Gone* uses a rhythmic loop against the lonesome fiddle to underscore the restlessness of moving on that is at the core of the songs character. Church has co-written all the songs here and sings them with conviction, even if his voice lacks some immediate distinction. His ethos is summed up in *Love Your Love The Most*, where he proclaims his love for his partner above that of Mama's cooking, bass fishing, four-wheel driving, NASCAR, George Strait and JD in his Coke. A good old boy then with an eye for the future. The five minute track *Those I've Loved* highlights his voice and writing and deals with love and life and features a strong guitar lead that builds up over a atmospheric backing and shows Church at his peak. This release has three bonus songs, including the single *His Kind Of Money (My Kind Of Love)* which was to be the lead single from this album but didn't chart well in the US and was then dropped from the US version of the album and it's difficult to see why it didn't chart higher as it is well up to the standard of his previous singles. Perhaps it isn't exactly the kind of sound that's hitting the high end of the country charts these days unlike label mate Dierks Bentley who delivers a similar charged country confection.

**Jack Ingram *Big Dreams & High Hopes* Big Machine/Humphead**

Jack Ingram is an artist I have listened to and enjoyed for a long time but since his move to Nashville label Big Machine the pleasure is less and less. Big Machine seem to be trying to compete with the young hunks and that's like putting him somewhere he doesn't need to go. His last album *This Is It* didn't really connect with me. This album is better but still seems to be trying to find it's footing. There are five producers listed for the eleven tracks, three of whom are credited on the previous album which suggest that some of the tracks here may have come from sessions from the previous albums. The song *Barbie Doll* makes it's third appearance on an Ingram album so somebody must feel that it's novelty style will be the song to break him through. This time it's a duet with Dierks Bentley with a big massed vocal chorus in the back-ground, but still doesn't sound like a chart-topper. Better is the Ingram produced title cut co-written by Ingram and Gary Burr. It is less bombastic and sums his motivation as a young man. His contemporaries, like Todd Snider now have the freedom and lower expectations of an independent label and ultimately this is where Jack Ingram fits better. That said this is a better overall album than his last album and more cohesive than the multi-producers might suggest. Ingram, still sings from his heart, with a big voice and picks songs that suit him, though maybe not not as easily as on his earlier albums. *Hey You* produced by Richard Bennett is still a high-point. There is still the sense that Ingram is trying to please radio programmers with his more recent outings. *King Of Wasted Time* is about not making it big, of lost opportunities, of regret and perhaps sums up the underlying sensibility of the album and of an artist who deserves more but maybe should have smaller dreams and less vaulted hopes. Though it should be said that this is a good enough album to warrant a listen.

**Darius Rucker *Learn To Live* Capitol/Humphead**

The three of the singles off this album deservedly reached the number one on the country charts. As singer and rhythm guitarist of Hootie and the Blowfish Darius Rucker had already made his mark in the industry. This, his second solo album and first country album has made his name as a solo artist. Not since Charlie Pride back in the 80's has an African /American been accepted to this degree in country music. Rucker has done it by making an album that utilises his emotion-laden voice on a set of songs primarily written by Rucker, mostly with his producer Frank Rogers who delivers a sound that is contemporary yet obviously country. Again there are top notch players and it is interesting to see the number of bluegrass players now doing A-team sessions. Here we see Aubrey Haynie, Ron Block and Bryan Sutton playing with veterans such as Brent Mason and Dan Dugmore. This is still mainstream country otherwise I don't think that you would see it getting the radio exposure that it has but there is real depth here that sometimes gets lost as Music Row reach for the big demographic. The concerns and hardships of the everyday man are told in songs like *It Won't Be Long Like This*, which shows that worries of parenthood change but the anxiety never stops. Alcohol, a country music staple is the root of *Drinkin' and Dialin'*. The only song that Rucker didn't have a hand in writing is *I Hope To Get To Me In Time* which is about a man in a critical car crash who sees his life pass before him and wants his life to go on to be able to do the things he needs to do in the future. Rucker tells the kind of stories that makes country music universal. This seems to be becoming a lost art but Darius Rucker is a welcome name in the genre and one can be hope that he will stay in the format and will continue to bring his strengths to the country music charts.

**Dierks Bentley *Feel That Fire* Capitol/Humphead**

Known as a road warrior Dierks Bentley is still moving on, learning how to live and to love, and honing his particular brand of hi-octane country. This blend that has already seen him hit the top spot with this album and its attendant singles. There are the sounds banjo, dobro and steel guitar fighting for their place in the mix of loud guitars and drums. But Bentley can also handle a ballad and deliver a slice of emotion to his audience. Nothing wrong with that idea as Steve Earle has long mixed protest and love song in equal measure and skill. The problem here is that Bentley finds it hard to bring that element of his loyal fan base to newer, rougher pastures. His music is growing up and his audience needs to move with him, as all the pointers on his recorded output and on evidence of his live performance show him capable of delivering his music with a harder, tougher edge. This is something that only time and some more years under his belt will tell. He is a recent father and that may well effect his worldview to some extent, leaving some of boys together themes behind. There is much here that delivers, such as his duet with Patty Griffen on *Beautiful World* or the upfront fun of the closing bluegrass-based *Last Call*, recorded with Ronnie McCoury and friends. He is growing as a singer developing some distinctiveness to his voice. It would be really interesting to see how this track would fare at radio as it has an infectious quality. But for Dierks Bentley, he still feels that fire, that passion for the music he loves and lives. His next album will be important to see exactly where he's taking his music. It may well be time to take some more chances to deliver on this promise and to make the music that will take his particular form of contemporary country music to a new level.

**Justin Moore *Valory* Humphead**

A new face on the scene this debut album finds Justin Moore as another solid country main-

stream singer/songwriter with a sound that is genre specific but with the sheen and polish expected from Nashville today. The song (and single) *Small Town USA* and the latest single *Backwoods* are full of lyrics about being a good country boy and living the rural life. Moore has co-written the majority of these songs, most often with producer Jeremy Stover who has fiddle and steel well to the fore in the mix. Moore is touring next year with Brad Paisley which will undoubtedly give him the opportunity to deliver his music to a like minded audience. It's real, well meant and vibrant but you still get the feeling that Moore's music will really come alive in a small bar in a small town, without the studio gloss. If he can bring that atmosphere to a larger stage then he has every chance of hitting it big. Radio sorely needs some harder country sounds to balance act the soft popish country its currently peddling and Moore could be one of the few to deliver it. Moore has his heart in the right place and doubtless will name some righteous influences for his music, a blend of southern rock and traditional country started by Hank Williams Jr. Indeed the final track *Hank It* is a tribute to Bocephus. Moore has made a solid, steadfast and satisfying album that augurs well for his future.

### **Arty Hill And The Long Gone Daddys** **Montgomery On My Mind** *Cow Island*

This fine ep from Art Hill, it is rooted in the 50's but very much about today. Unfortunately you are never going to hear this on your Hot Country station and more's the pity, as this is hard-core and heartfelt. Hill delivers three originals including *Church On Saturday Night* about the Grand Ol' Opry and the title track. Hill also reaffirms the power and longevity of those songs written so long ago and recorded by an acknowledged master. Arty Hill may also claim credit for his interpretations of songs made famous by Hank Williams Snr. No Bocephusishness here.

The Long Gone Daddys are a dynamic team of players who obviously love and live for the music that they play. This is a welcome addition to Hill's previous albums and to real country music in general, lovers of the real deal should check this out pronto. [www.cowislandmusic.com](http://www.cowislandmusic.com)

### **Robert Earl Keen** *The Rose Hotel* *Lost Highway/Humphead*

This is pure Keen and again emphasizes his preeminence as a story teller in the Texas tradition. He also delivers a fine take on the one outside song Townes Van Zandt's *Flying Shoes*. Produced by Lloyd Maines this is an album that those who count themselves as Keen customers will doubtless enjoy. The songs run from the humour of the final track *Wireless In Heaven* and *10,000 Chinese Walk Into A Bar*, which features Billy Bob Thornton on vocals to title story of the *Rose Hotel* to *On and On* about a musician on the road. *Goodbye Cleveland* is also a memorable song with banjo, harmonica and steel guitar prominent. There may not be any immediate classics here, but there are a lot of different moods that will make this album a regular replay. The assembled musicians, many Keen regulars, all support the songs exactly as they should and one hopes that Robert Earl Keen might meet a wider audience for his music. *The Rose Hotel* is worth checking into.

### **Phil Lee** *So Long, It's Been Good To Know You* *Steady Boy*

Not the final statement that the title might imply (hopefully) but rather another slice of life, love and Phil Lee. Produced by the mighty king of guitar Richard Bennett this is a diverse but considered statement of intent from all concerned. It includes the sad tale of trucker torment in *Sonny George* (not a song that is related to the hillbilly singer of that name). A piece of primal storytelling over a solid beat and supported by a twang laden guitar. The theme of love is covered by *Let There Be Love, Tonight*

a soulful B3 and brass infused story of role playing delivered in Lee's highly distinctive lived-in voice. *Lover's Everywhere* and *I Hope Love Always Knows Your Name* completes the trio of love titles. *Miller's Mill Pond* sounds like a Dylan inspired traditional song. *The Tatterbug Rag* is a late night smoke-filled room type of song with spoken vocals and harmonica. *Where a Rat's Lips Have Touched* has a joyous touch that sounds like it escaped from a musical operetta from the Twilight Zone. All in all it's a whole bunch of eclectic fun that warms the heart and soul with its sense of positive negativity. Phil Lee is a unique talent and one who makes very interesting, unstable enjoyable albums that deserve to be heard to be fully appreciated. [www.phillee1.com](http://www.phillee1.com)

### **Holly Williams** *Here With Me* *Humphead*

Holly Williams is at the heart of this album as main writer, co-producer, art director and designer. This time the sound has moved a little towards country and again the songs come from the heart. *Mama* is a testament to her mother's strength and how she gave Holly an open mind and sense of love. *I Hold On* features Chris Janson and is another underplayed yet effective song. *A Love I Think Will Last* again features Janson this time in a duet on a straight-country styled song with twanging guitar and steel. It was also written with Janson and its up-tempo positivity makes it an album highlight. More drum dominated is *Keep The Change*, a song written by Hilary Lindsey and Luke Laird. One of three outside songs it sounds like it should do well at radio. Throughout Williams delivers strong clear, committed vocals that reveal her as a singer of sensitivity and power but not one who over emotes or over sings as so many of her contemporaries tend to. Some tracks are more produced than others; *Gone With The Morning Sun* is a big power ballad. In contrast *Without Jesus Here With Me* is a song that speaks of faith rather than religion,

it has a less obvious accompaniment. Equally restrained is the album closer, a cover of Neil Young's *Birds* that is just voice and piano and yet is as powerful as the fuller sounding songs. Though Williams comes from a legendary family she is making music that is very much about her and who she is.

### **Stephen Fearing** *The Man Who Married Music* *True North*

Great title for this overview of the recent work of this acclaimed Canadian singer/songwriter. Closer to home Fearing was raised in Dublin before he returned to Canada and started his musical career. As a simplistic comparison think Richard Thompson in terms of scope, integrity and lyrical dexterity. He is a strong singer, lyrical writer and a fine guitar player. He is also a member of Blackie and The Rodeo Kings. This best of is a selection that Fearing has picked from recent albums. His 1989 album was produced by Clive Gregson, here however fellow Rodeo Kings member Colin Linden has produced as do Steve Berlin and Fearing himself. There are two unreleased songs added to the collection which covers studio albums as well as live recordings. Taken from half a dozen albums these 15 songs give a good overview of his work. The oldest tracks here are from the 1988 album *Out To Sea* and the most recent are from *Yellowjacket* released in 2006. *From Out To Sea* comes the direct guitar and voice song *Welfare Wednesday* which shows an understanding of the plight of those fallen on hard times. In complete contrast is *Anything You Want* from *Industrial Lullaby* with a band lending moral and motivational support. The ten minute plus *Dog On A Chain/James* medley comes from the live album *So Many Miles* and is pure storytelling, voice and guitar holding the audience's rapt attention. The title track tackles the subject of married man versus the musician and the road. The final tracks *The Big East West* and *No Dress Rehearsal* are un-

released and contrast Fearing's way of work with the former just stripped back to guitar while the latter has a band behind him for a song that makes the assertion that life is no dress rehearsal. So true, Mr Fearing, so true.

### **Richmond Fontaine *We Used To Think The Freeway Sounded Like A River* Decor**

With an album title that suggests an urban sense of movement and decay, Richmond Fontaine have produced an album that is identifiably them. For their tenth studio album and latest in a series produced by JD Foster they have added a layer of subtlety and understatement which affirms their vision. Those familiar with the band and its development over the years will applaud the way that this is an integrated and intelligent working unit. Through his writing of his novels and generally acting as spokesman there would be possible and easy assumption that this Willy Vlautin and friends rather than the rounded band that it is. The songs still look with affection and understanding at those who have fallen through the cracks and live on the margins of society. After an enforced layout after an accident Willy Vlautin wrote the bulk of the album which the band and Foster then realized in a way that brings a greater depth to the album as a body of work with steel guitar, piano, cello and trumpet among the instruments adding the textures, the ripples on the freeway, ripples that catch the light and cause you to contemplate the overall clarity of vision. This is also apparent in the two instrumental tracks included. It is still the Richmond Fontaine that those in the know have come to love. Like the guitar riff that runs throughout *Watch Out* or the more frantic pace of 43, the story of Ruby and Lou or Lonnie people whose lives you gain an insight into through the way they live, something that Vlautin so concisely captures in his song sketches. All of which, as the album subtitle makes clear, are "songs written around and about the Pacific

Northwest". Songs from a time and a place and songs that need time to absorb to fully appreciate what has been put into them. For Richmond Fontaine followers this will arguably be their best album to date and not one to leave out of your collection.

### **Magnolia Summer Lines From The *Frame* Undertow**

This band make music that has a worldview that is in keeping with the recycled nature of the cover's cardboard sleeve. We have yet, though, to find a way to get music onto a more recyclable format itself. So what does that little shiny piece of silver have to offer? The band from St. Louis, Missouri have made two previous albums. Theirs is a largely gentle, but dynamic sound featuring a mix of a simple overall approach and a complex delivery. Chris Grabau is the band's key writer and lead singer, as well as a multi-instrumentalist whose slightly pensive songs have the air of a sunny splashed day as dark clouds appear on the horizon. The band have co-produced the album with Joe Thebeau at Sawhouse Studio, a studio where Sun Volt have also recorded. The songs though can, on occasion, up the tempo and mood. *Pulling Phase To The Ground* fairly rocks in an early R.E.M. kind of way, while the more pensive *Birds Without A Wire* features a vocal from Kelly Kneiser from Glossary and some solid pedal steel guitar from D. Anderson, who makes a couple of appearances on the album, as do other guests who augment the core line-up. Various members also come from other bands from the region for this project - guitarist John Horton is a member of the Bottle Rockets for instance. Given the diverse nature of band members it is a cohesive slice of post alt country that comes from a heritage of indie, roots and country rock. The songs that speak for themselves from the energy of *Like Setting Sons* to the more relaxed but equally powerful *Diminished Returns* all stand up to scrutiny and deliver a solid musical ex-

perience. Another band to explore for those who like good music from the fringes.

### **Sam Baker *Cotton Music Road***

There are some who don't get, or simply don't like Sam Baker's spoken word song style. But I wonder in a couple of decades time if he will be playing the O2 as Leonard Cohen, another singer/songwriter who faced criticism for his voice, has. Like Cohen, on record at least, Baker offsets his vocal deficiencies with layered arrangements that bring depth to the songs. The production by Tim Lorsch and Baker brings out the best from these songs of southern life that are placed from the outset by the opening voice collage of the song Dixie. Baker follows with the title track that tells a tale of family history of how "daddy hoed the cotton like I do" but that "one day he just walked away". From then on Baker tells of a Mennonite from Mexico, of people carrying signs on street corners, another of a bridal chest. These are vignettes of another time, another place that seems far away but in truth may not be so. Mid way through the album Steve Conn plays a brief but haunting piano interlude that leads to a series of songs that have a more personal approach to lives, loves and the Lord. The playing throughout is understated and celebrates the song. George Bradfute on guitars and Mike Daly on pedal steel and slide are just a couple of exemplary players involved with this, Baker's third album. Those taken with Baker, either live or on his previous two albums, will carry on that path and find much to admire. If however you're in the other camp then nothing here is likely to do much to alter that. I have enjoyed his engaging music both live and on record and was readily drawn into Baker's world of words and woven musical textures. Let's see what the next couple of decades might bring.

**Nanci Griffith *The Loving Kind* Rounder**  
Something of a resurgence for Griffith, this album

plays to her strengths with focussed writing and strong personal and political viewpoints. The title track is a true story inter-racial love. *Money Changes Everything* simply expresses that viewpoint. *Up Against The Rain* and *Cotton* tell of people who lived life in a particular time and with a particular sense of purpose. *Not Innocent Enough* tells the simple tale of wrong place, wrong time; how but for circumstance we could all be placed in a situation that could lead life to a totally different path. It also rails against the death penalty. Many of the songs are co-written by Griffith with Charley Steff and Thomm Jutz who co-produces with longtime Griffith associate Pat McNerney. Griffith's distinctive and caring voice dominates the album and is underpinned by a fine band with ensemble playing that runs from folk-rock to country touching on all points in between. *The Loving Kind* can easily be counted among Griffith's best work and should delight her many fans as well as opening a door for newcomers.

### **Chuck Prophet *Let Freedom Ring* Cooking Vinyl**

Prophet's music always has had an edge and been about rock 'n' roll crossed with beats and turntables and attitude. Sometimes roots rock has shown up in the mix. For this latest album he wanted to try something different and felt he needed to record outside the US and he decided to record in Mexico. There they had to work in a studio with power problems, hard drive crashes and in a city that was gripped by the swine flu pandemic. But he had said he wanted an "adventure". The music that came from those sessions has that sense of adventure, that essential energy and it makes a point. He says these are "political songs for non-political people" and that's where these songs are coming from in what is quite possibly one of Prophet's best albums of his always interesting career wherein all the external factors made for good music.



### **Cross Canadian Ragweed Happiness And All The Other Things Humphead**

This is a robust slice of rockin' roots music. The sort of thing that Reckless Kelly fans would enjoy. The band, led by Cody Canada, the main songwriter, singer and lead guitarist, delivers songs that can be tender (*Bluebonnets*), songs that rock (*51 Pieces*) or that are more country (*Kick In The Head* - thanks to Lloyd Maines' pedal steel). These are songs songs that will further the spread of Cross Canadian Ragweed. The one outside song is from the late Stephen Bruton, *To Find My Love*, a song about finding that special person and is graced by a strong chorus. They stretch out somewhat on *Pretty Lady* where there is a subtlety at work that allows the song to develop nicely over the mid-paced drum pattern and has some piano textures that add to the overall effect. Cross Canadian Ragweed are seasoned veterans, this being their tenth album or so, counting live albums. Produced by fellow singer/songwriter Mike McClure, it covers a range of emotions and attitudes on love and life with some upfront riff-based songs that may not always connect with a wider audience but which have an effective core and are doubtless what their followers expect.

### **David Nail I'm About To Come Alive Humphead**

From the credits you assume that this will be a contemporary country album similar to someone like Gary Allen. Indeed, if you were to take some of that Allen's more recent recording you could see the link to this collection of wordy and worthy songs but overall Nail fails to connect on a level I'm looking for. While Nail has a strong voice and delivers the songs well and the players are top notch there is something missing. The songs have been picked from some reliable writers and Nail himself writes one song solo and contributes to three others. That solo song *Missouri* closes

the album and is one of the better tracks, a soulful rumination on doing the right thing by someone who has been there despite the odds. Nail is really more a singer/songwriter recording in Nashville with pedal steel than an out and out country artist. Nothing wrong with that as there has always been a lot more to Nashville than just mainstream country but I couldn't find a hell of a lot to take from this album that lodged itself in my memory. Despite that it is a solid, well produced and sung album that will find it's own level.

### **The O's We Are The O's Idol**

The O's are a rough and ready duo who sing, play banjo and guitar and hit things. The result is a down-to-earth take on old time music delivered with a punky DIY attitude. The duo have written all the songs and by and large if you like the first song you'll like the album. It doesn't change a lot overall. On occasion a song like *We've Had Everything* stands out due to the duo's harmonies or more melodic structure. Sounding at times like a two-man Old Crow Medicine Show, they have the enthusiasm and the energy and they have the room to grow. *We Are The O's* is a promising if basic start that will doubtless win them favour with a growing audience for their particular take on a living, breathing form whose roots go back a long way.

### **Tom Mason Alchemy Gas Station Music**

An all-round musician, singer and songwriter Tom Mason has been a part of the East Nashville musical community for a long time now, either in his own right or as a valuable sideman. His latest album has little to do with country music but a lot to do with great playing and striking songwriting. It covers many bases that touch on numerous sources that he makes his own from the opening *Conjuring* which features a great vocal contribution from Sheila Lawrence, who along with Pru Clearwater add strong

vocal contributions throughout. Other Nashville notables involved include ex-Derailer Mark Horn, David Jacques, Jen Gunderman, Joey Spampinato and Billy Block amongst others. The eclectic nature of the songs in this cases make the album more interesting rather than having any lack of focus. It is all held together by Mason's defined and dignified vocals and playing. The songs touch on blues, vaudeville, gypsy music and range from songs like percussive *Chano Pozo's Shoes*, a somewhat Waitsian *The World Is Drunk*, the sea shanty *Pirate Song* and the story telling of *The Amazing Lorenzo* which would actually makes sense to Chris De Burgh fans. This is a delight of Americana music and all the influences that were awash in that country a century or so ago. Tom Mason makes musical alchemy that delivers it's magic and deserves a wider audience for its musical wonders. [www.tommason.net](http://www.tommason.net)

### **Errol Walsh No Border Self-Release**

This new solo record from Errol Walsh is to raise awareness and provide funds for his work in support of Huntington's Disease in Northern Ireland. But aside from that very worthy incentive it is a good purchase in it's own right with Walsh touching a variety of roots music reference points. Produced, engineered and mastered by Clive Culbertson, another veteran of the Northern Ireland music scene, it sounds relaxed and righteous. The other players all give sterling performances that include brass, pedal steel, fiddle and accordion, The songs run from the country tones of *Wedding At Joshua Tree*, about his recent wedding that is full of the warmth of the occasion and location. *Just Another Border* follows a similar country path to great effect. *Alternative Birthday Gifts*, has a light bluesy touch while *Shadows on the Ground* has an old-time feel with subtle brass and Dobro. The brass also underpins his song about not quite fitting in *Square Peg In A Round Hole*. *I'm Ready* is a soulful song about

looking for spiritual comfort with some subtle organ behind the vocal chorus. Perhaps the key track is the gentle fiddle led song *Rachael*, written for his step daughter who suffers from Huntington's Disease and is full of quiet passion and a palpable sense of loss. Throughout Walsh delivers his songs with a strong convincing voice that is world weary, truthful but hopeful, all of which makes this an enjoyable collection of songs and one that will deliver something more than good music. You can and should buy the album from [www.errolwalsh.co.uk](http://www.errolwalsh.co.uk) where all proceeds will go directly to help sufferers and provide information about Huntington's Disease, whose sufferers included Woody Guthrie.

### **Sugarland Live On The Inside Humphead**

A live package of CD/DVD from a "country" act who tellingly credits Kings Of Leon, R.E.M., Pearl Jam and the B52's as inspiration. Given that what follows fits into the preconception of what country music is today for those attuned to mainstream country radio. Jennifer Nettles is a solid upfront and twangy vocalist and the music features mandolins and acoustic guitars. *Sex On Fire* the Kings of Leon songs is given a stripped down effective piano and acoustic guitar reading that highlights Nettles' talent and that of fellow Sugarland co-founder Kristain Bush. For this album they have also chosen to reinterpret Beyonce's *Irreplaceable*, R.E.M.'s *Nightswimming* and *The One I Love*, sung by Bush and Nettles and it's a pretty good version that brings out the yearning of the song's lyric. They follow that with their full-on take on the B52's *Love Shack* and they close with their own *Stay*. All in all credible and with more restraint than might be expected, but I can't see why anyone would call it country music. It is solid, straight forward arena pop-rock and it's pretty good. The audio is taken from a number of locations while the DVD is from one concert and features additional songs not on the CD.

**Reba McEntire *Keep On Loving You***  
*Starstruck*

Another powerful set from Reba who straddles a number of different formats including pop, power ballad and country - and combinations of all three. The latter features on *I Want A Cowboy* while songs like *I Keep On Lovin' You* and *Maggie Creek Road* are a little more country. The writers include some solid Music Row names like Neil Thrasher, Rivers Rutherford and others like Leslie Satcher and Darrell Scott. The latter duo's *Eight Crazy Hours* is a highlight with a measured delivery from McEntire who is a powerful and perceptive vocalist who knows what she wants from a song and delivers it. Co-produced by the lady herself with Mark Bright and Tony Brown it is a big glossy A-team sound. It is an album that will reinforce her status as a major league player. This will appeal to her fans as well as to some of those who delight in crossover country-pop.

**Ethyl and The Regulars *Fill 'Er Up With...***  
*Sweet Crude*

This is the pungent smell of real country music. This quintet from Denver, Colorado play country music, no ifs or buts, as if they were born to it and they probably were. This album is a high octane mix of originals and well chosen covers that highlights the playing talents of the band as well as the singing of the bands three lead singers all of whom create something that has variety but cohesion. Jeff Yeary, Hank Hays and Donnie Jerome tend to take the lead vocals on the songs that they have written and share out the covers which include *Cash On The Barrelhead*, *Knee Deep In The Blues* and the traditional *Clementine*. Their own songs easily stand up with *Long Gone*, *Long Forgotten*, *Let's Pretend* and *Love's Gonna Get You* all being memorable. The 16 tracks cover honky tonk, western swing and rockabilly - hardcore country in other words and it's a joy to hear something delivered for its own sake not made to please radio or record

companies who wouldn't appreciate what's actually going on here anyway. What's going on here will appeal to anyone who loves their country music fresh, vital and fun; music that has in roots in a golden era but is a living breathing thing. Fill up on this and it'll keep you going for miles. [www.ethylandtheregulars.com](http://www.ethylandtheregulars.com)

*All reviews by Stephen Rapid*