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High John • Push & Pull • Births & Deaths REVIEWS

The Blasters • Brown Eyed Soul • Paul Burlison • Ray Condo & His Ricochets
Country: Essential Albums Guide • Fred Eaglesmith • Robbie Fulks
Lowell Fulson • Chris Gaffney • Lorne Greene • Merle Haggard
Butch Hancock • Sonny James • Evan Johns • Bill Kirchen
Fred McDowell • Mumbo Gumbo • Steve Owen
Carl Perkins & Scotty Moore • Reckless Kelly

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3CM RECORD REVIEWS

FRED EAGLESMITH

LIPSTICK LIES & GASOLINE

(Razor & Tie, CD)

The greatest reward of doing what I do is when people go out of their way to thank me for turning them on to a particular artist they hadn't known of before. While this happens gratifyingly often, an indie-only advantage, some appreciations are more widespread and/or heartfelt than others, Terry Allen, Bobby Charles, Ray Wylie Hubbard, William James IV, ThaMuseMeant and Cary Swinney particularly come to mind, as does Canadian singer-songwriter Fred Eaglesmith. Common denominators aren't hard to find, individuality, integrity, intelligence and intensity—in short, art and grit—and these qualities permeate Eaglesmith's latest. If *Drive-In Movie*, on the defunct Vertical, seemed somewhat compromised in comparison to Barbed Wire's wonderful *From The Paradise Motel*, deeply rooted in rural Southern Ontario verities, he's recovered his balance with a song orientated album that's very different from either. The basic approach seems to be whatever works, so some are almost straight country (not that Canadian Country shit though), as when Eaglesmith and Lynn Miles do a co-dependent George & Tammy on *Drinking Too Much*, others run a gamut from folk to folk-rock to songwriter rock and the instrumentation changes accordingly. While his road band, The Flying Squirrels, Willie P Bennett mandolin and Ralph Schipper bass, sidelined on *Drive-In Movie*, get far more of a look in, Eaglesmith deploys everything from pedal steel (Kim Deschamps, very impressive) to a variety of organs, banjos to electric guitars. If his references have become less specific, his themes, pace the album title, are still very evident, noticeably his West Texas like emphasis on personal transportation ("I like to drive at") 105, *Pontiac*, *Water In The Fuel*. Eaglesmith's songs often require close attention, the most accessible being his sardonic militia anthem *Time To Get A Gun* ("I could afford one if I did just a little less drinking") and *Alcohol & Pills*, a paean to Hank Williams, Elvis Presley and other casualties, but if he's demanding as a writer, he's equally rewarding, and few singers are so convincing in their delivery. JC

FRED McDOWELL • THE FIRST RECORDINGS
LOWELL FULSON • MY FIRST RECORDINGS

(Rounder, CD/Arhoolie, CD)

Not being a musicologist, I have little idea what motivates them, but I can't help feeling that on some level the hope that round the next corner they may chance on a hitherto unknown, unrecorded genius must figure in there somewhere. McDowell was the most fruitful find made by Alan Lomax on his 1959 field trip through The South, a farmer in his mid-50s who was also an astonishing bottleneck guitarist and expressive singer, playing country blues for friends and neighbors round Como, Mississippi. Five cuts on Lomax's anthologies of his field recordings instantly propelled McDowell from this obscurity into the front ranks, universally hailed as the great blues discovery of the 60s. Supplemented by nine more, previously unreleased and in many cases never again recorded, these songs finally appear under McDowell's name, filling a crucial gap in the extensive and wonderful catalog he created before his death in 1972. Without putting too much on McDowell, I have to say that seeing him at the 1965 American Folk Blues Festival, which, incidentally, also featured JB Lenoir, Walter Horton, Buddy Guy, Roosevelt Sykes, Eddie Boyd and John Lee Hooker, was a seminal experience that marked me for life—I still think of Bonnie Raitt as a lightweight McDowell knock-off, an opinion this album provides no reason for revising.

◆ If the blues career of Lowell Fulson, a Chickasaw-Black from Tulsa, was rather more conventional, apart from anything else he was half McDowell's age when he began recording, it's also one of the most remarkable. For over six decades, he's balanced integrity and innovation (OK, he once covered a Beatles song, nobody's perfect), a living link between country blues, urban blues and R&B. This collection of 26 sides released as 78s on Oakland and LA labels between 1946 and 1952, trace his development from Southwestern country bluesman, drawing on his pre-War apprenticeship as Alger 'Texas' Alexander's guitarist, to hip T-Bone Walker disciple, with a small combo featuring a teenage Earl Brown on alto sax and Lloyd Glenn piano (later Fulson sidemen included Ray Charles and Stanley Turrentine). Notable cuts include *Three O'Clock Blues*, which Fulson gave to BB King in return for promoting a Memphis show, *Why Can't You Cry For Me*, *Black Widow Spider Blues* and, intimations of R&B, *There Is A Time For Everything* and the instrumental *Lowell Jumps One* (Cash Box Boogie), with Dexter Gordon on tenor sax. JC

STEVE OWEN

BOTTOMLESS JOE • QUALITY USED PARTS

(Cojema, CDs)

So, I wrote this glowing review of *Bottomless Joe* about two years ago, but flat lost it and, though it's nominally been in the 'live' pile ever since, never did get round to starting over. Fortunately, by putting out another album, San Francisco-based Owen provides both an opportunity to make amends and to double up the recommendation. If you had to summarize his music in one word, it would have to be Bluegrass, but never was label so misleading. Yes, Owen plays banjo (and harmonica and guitar), and yes, the main picker is mandolin virtuoso Mike Marshall, who also contributes fiddle and slide guitar, but behind them, on *Bottomless Joe*, is a junkyard drum kit and as Owen remarks, "The tuba pretty much knocks us straight off the country stations." Then there's the literate, hyperrealist urban grit of the lyrics, etched with telling phrases and gallows humor. Given two words to play with, I'd call it 'Insurgent Bluegrass,' for, like his country cousins, Owen eschews formalistic and formulaic conventions, reinventing bluegrass as a vehicle for observing, through the bottom of a shot glass, a desolate landscape of empty, wasted lives. Their ancestors may have emigrated from Scotland and Ireland to Kentucky or the Carolinas, but Owen's alienated characters, dead vagrants, career drinkers and bluecollar workers, have drifted into the deadend of a derelict inner city. Musically somewhat fuller—both albums benefit enormously from the austere, self-effacing, virtually transparent production style of Cookie Marenco—with economical dabs of "honky tonk mandocello," bawooki, accordion, clarinet, viola, B3 and trumpet, *Quality Used Parts* may sound rather less raw, but the songs are, if anything, even more incisive and disturbing. It's hard to single out specific songs, the quality is so consistent, but *Swamp Cooler Blues* and *I'm The One To Blame* are, by a short head on each album, the standouts. Maybe another expression for Owen's work could be 'Country Noir,' but by any name it's vivid, abrasive and intelligent. JC

THE ADVENTURES OF MUMBO GUMBO

(Ruby, CD)

Warm memories still linger of Mumbo Gumbo's show at La Zona Rosa a few years ago when, if I recall rightly, they were bidding to become a national touring act. Presumably the experience of keeping an eight piece band on the road made them rethink the project because they seem to have firmly retrenched back in their rock solid Northern California base. That base is very evident on this live album, recorded at clubs in Nevada City, Davis, Tahoe and Reno, at the Strawberry Festival and on a Reno radio station, which for the most part demonstrates why they're such a regional favorite party band. Mumbo Gumbo's great strengths, above and beyond two wonderful female vocalists, Tracy Walton and Chris Webster (who also plays washboard and sax) and a fine accordionist and pianist, Billy Fairfield, is that they not only seem to be having a shitload of fun, they make it infectious, something not all party bands can manage. Moreover, they knock out some strong originals, notably Fairfield's *Burnin' In Love*, Walton's *Barbeque* and, acoustic, Fairfield & Webster's *Round & Round*, and if their taste in covers is erratic, they have some splendid moments, a gentle, slow version of Domino & Bartholomew's *Hello Josephine, Hoy Hoy*, written by Jonah Jones for Cab Calloway, Sly Stone's *Everyday People* (with a Polka reprise!) and the Collins Kids' *Hop Skip & Jump*. The damper is the amount of self-indulgence on display, lame intros and studio chat, a track called *Studio Stupidity*, in which they take the piss out of *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*, all jolly fun for them, but, like the 11+ minutes of inspirational soul, *Rainbow Love*, it gets pretty tedious when you have to plough through it to get to the good stuff. JC

EVAN JOHNS & THE H-BOMBS

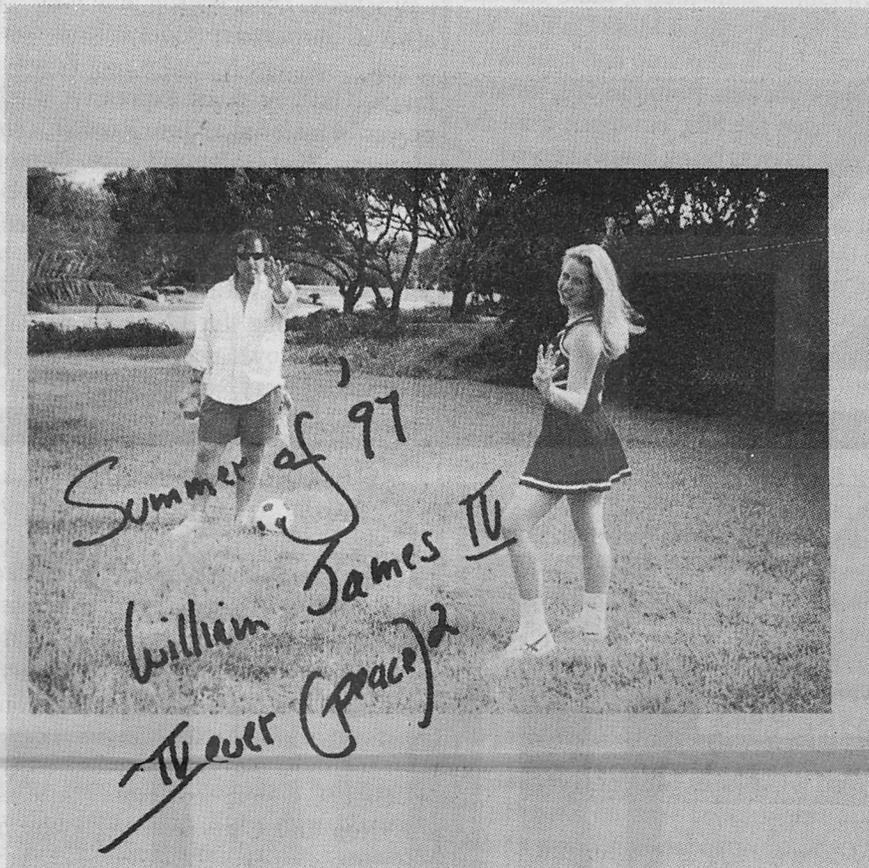
LOVE IS MURDER

(Freedom, CD)

Earlier this year, Johns went back to his native Washington, DC, where he's apparently basking in a local guitar hero's welcome home, leaving behind only one souvenir of his long, if erratic, reign as Austin's boss rock & roller. *Burnin' Down The Barn* (Only Boy, 1995), recorded on a Walkman at The Hole In The Wall, which, acoustically, can compete with any garage, had its roughhewn virtues, but if it was more representative of Johns' chainsaw massacre live gigs, this reissue of an album originally released as a Jungle Records LP in 1986, when Johns was in considerably better physical shape, is easier to digest. Three of the tracks were cut in 1983 at a New Jersey studio, produced by then rather obviously neophyte Garry Tallent, after which Tallent went off on the Born In The USA tour and Johns left DC to join The LeRoi Brothers. In 1985 he persuaded Mark Korpi, Ivan Brown and Jim Starboard to join him and reformed The H-Bombs, so the other eleven, noticeably better sounding, tracks were cut in Austin, two, including a previously unreleased bonus track, *One Ton Home*, featuring Johns (guitars, Vox organ, lap steel, basses, slide and harmonica) playing all instruments. Apart from Eddy Harrington's standby *My Baby Left Me*, the material's all original, two of the songs, the title track and the knockout *Day Go By*, co-written with DC luminary Joe Sasfy, one, *Bar-B-Cutie*, with DC guitar legend (and a teenage Johns' first employer) Danny Gatton, and, if the mixes are a bit weird, this here's some terrific hardcore rock & roll, with at least one shouldabeenahit, *Hey Whew!* JC

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3CM RECORD REVIEWS

BROWN EYED SOUL: THE SOUND OF EAST LA

(Rhino, 3 CDs)

Corporate America has discovered the Latino market, something David Reyes & Tom Waldman, authors of the forthcoming *Land Of A Thousand Dances*; Chicano Rock 'N' Roll From Southern California, clearly regret, remarking in their liner notes to these three compilations, "Hispanics will be increasingly subjected to the same mass marketing techniques as every other group." Back in the 60s, however, when popular music's main dynamic was the hormones of 14 year old white girls, nobody was trying to sell it to Hispanics, and while regional music was disappearing everywhere else, the community in East Los Angeles was large and vital enough to sustain its own clubs, indie labels, radio stations and artists, an hermetic scene in the shadow of homogenized Mass Culture. On any level, this is wild and wonderful rock & roll, R&B, doo-wop and soul, what makes it truly amazing is the release dates; there are cuts from the 50s, notably Chuck Wiggins' 1953 *Pachuko Rock*, the 70s, even the 80s, but those from the 60s predominate, and they're real different from what was being heard everywhere else—in East LA, they didn't seem to give a rat's ass about The Beatles and Stones. East LA loved romantic ballads, and was fanatically loyal to artists like Brenton Wood, an area star to this day, and to their songs, still staples in clubs and on local radio 30 or more years later. With 48 tracks (16 apiece), I can only skim the cream, The Penguins' *Hey Senorita*, El Chicano's *Brown Eyed Girl*, Rene & Ray's *Queen Of My Heart*, Johnny 'Guitar' Watson's *Those Lonely Lonely Nights*, The Paradons' *Diamonds And Pearls*, The Premiers' *Farmer John*, Cannibal & The Headhunters' *Land Of 1000 Dances* (fun trivia; Frankie Garcia forgot Chris Kenner's lyrics and faked it with "na na-na na na . . ." and that's what Wilson Pickett covered), Thee Midnighters' *Making Ends Meet* and Peaches & Herb's *Close Your Eyes*. Exhilarating and mildly depressing—hearing what was going on in this musical Shangri-La, one can't help but resent how badly the major labels, and those prepubescent girls, fucked everything up for the rest of us. JC

PAUL BURLISON • TRAIN KEPT A-ROLLIN' CARL PERKINS & SCOTTY MOORE 706 REUNION

(Sweetfish, CD/Belle Meade, CD)

The guest list for the legendary buzz-saw lead guitarist of Memphis rockabilly monsters The Rock 'N' Roll Trio is less star-studded than on Sweetfish's Scotty Moore album, but he too often seems to be a bystander on his own album. It gets off to a real promising start with the title track, the Trio's biggest hit, a family affair featuring the sons of Burlison's Trio colleagues Johnny & Dorsey Burnette, Rocky on vocals and Billy on rhythm guitars, with DJ Fontana drums, but goes downhill from there, except when Rocky returns on *Trouble Is I'm In Love With You* (wish they'd done *Tear It Up*). Fronting three tracks, Kim Wilson, bit of a comedown for a man who started out with Howlin' Wolf, is so much the worst offender in forgetting whose album this was supposed to be, he makes David Hidalgo and Cesar Rosas sound reverential. Billy Burnette's turn on vocals falls flat, while Rick Danko's stab at *Lonesome Train (On A Lonesome Track)* is pathetically lame, but more fool him for trying to compete with the Trio's killer version, immortalized in *Rock, Rock, Rock*. However, overshadowing all the other misfires is Levon Helm & Mavis Staples' utterly worthless version of *Hound Dog*. Once again, a great idea beaten to death with shithead production values. Burlison's reputation was made in the archetype minimalist group, lead guitar (though many people think Grady Martin actually played on the records), rhythm guitar/vocals and upright bass, but here he's the only fixed point, every track having a different lineup, usually seven or eight strong, with bells and whistles galore. If they'd sent everyone home but Rocky Burnette, Billy Burnette (long as he didn't sing) and Gary Tallent (bass), this might have been pretty cool.

♦ Reviewing *All The King's Men* (#7/96), I ought to have done a compare and contrast with *706 Reunion*, but wasn't sure this 1992 gettogether was still available. Turns out it is, from Curtis Wood, and, as Paul Burlison plays rhythm guitar on it, this is as good a time as any to catch up. Recorded at Sun Studio (706 Union, Memphis), a locale moderately familiar to both men, the album's subtitled 'A Sentimental Journey,' and it has to be said there are some hokey aspects to it, but among the stilted conversational interplay, Perkins' comment, "It's fun to play when there's no pressure," rings true. On the 15 tracks, including *Raunchy*, *Milk Cow Blues Boogie*, *Blue Suede Shoes*, *Harbor Lights*, *Matchbox* and *Mystery Train*, the dangerously intense young rockabillys of 40 years ago have mellowed into relaxed elder statesmen simply having a good time together. Where this album really scores over *All The King's Men* is in the lineup. Instead of Keith Richards, The Band, Cheap Trick, The BoDeans, etc, etc, etc, Moore is in the company of his peers, Perkins and Burlison, of course, but also DJ Fontana drums and The Jordanaires backup vocals. JC

CHRIS GAFFNEY • LOSER'S PARADISE

(HighTone, CD)

For reasons, as tedious as they are sordid, I won't bore you with, I was cut off from HighTone when this album came out in 1995, but as singer/songwriter/accordionist Gaffney is bringing 100 copies with him on a barnstorming—eight gigs in 10 days—trip to Texas, this seems a pertinent time to catch up. Apart from anything else, I know how much he has to pay for the bastards, and, believe me, he needs all the help he can get. This is, overall, the best of Gaffney's four albums, a pretty safe thing to say as it's been out long enough for a consensus to form among his admirers, most of whom, for better or worse, seem to be either musicians or music writers. Produced by Dave Alvin, made in Austin and featuring Alvin on a couple of tracks, Ian McLagan, Ted Roddy, Ponty Bone, Sarah Brown, Bradley Jaye Williams, Gene Elders, Scott Walls, Big Boy Boudreaux, Rosie Flores, Jim Lauderdale, Dale Watson and Tony Villanueva, it's a convincing portrait of the artist as all-purpose Southwestern roots maven, anthologizing honky tonk, rock & roll, soul, Tex-Mex, Swamp Pop, Cajun and Zydeco. For all his limited vocal range, Gaffney gives expressive, hardbitten and hard to top readings of such powerful material as Tom Russell's *The Eyes Of Roberto Duran*, Alvin's *East Of Houston, West Of Baton Rouge*, Gamble & Huff's 1968 Intruders hit *Cowboys To Girls*, with Lucinda Williams, and Ed Bruce's *See The Big Man Cry*, not to mention his own title track, *The Man Of Somebody's Dreams*, *So Far From God (And Too Close To You)*, *Azulito*, *My Baby's Got A Dead Man's Number* and, revised from 1990's *Chris Gaffney & The Cold Hard Facts*, *Glasshouse*. In fact, the only real dud among the 12 tracks is Alvin's *Help You Dream*, though dusting off *Sugar Bee* shows a certain lack of finesse. Gaffney's gigs are always extremely cool, and if you go to one, help the guy out, buy a copy of this album—you won't regret it. JC

BILL KIRCHEN • HOT ROD LINCOLN—LIVE!

(HighTone, CD)

First time I saw Kirchen was with Commander Cody & The Lost Planet Airmen in a jampacked warehouse in Manchester (UK), next time was two decades later, playing inside at La Zona Rosa to about 25 people, mostly guitar players, but the difference, and the years, didn't seem to have any noticeable effect on the brand of rock & roll/country barroom mayhem that Cody invented but his guitarist perfected and sustained. The stage is Kirchen's natural habitat, so a live album, recorded in his adopted Maryland stomping grounds, at The Globe Theater, Berlin, is a natural—apart from anything else it means a proper (eight minute) workout, instead of a stunted studio one, of his epic, showstopping trademark *Hot Rod Lincoln*, with a full, rather than token, palette of other guitar players' licks, from Johnny Cash to Jimi Hendrix, via, well you name it. *Hot Rod Lincoln* is the centerpiece of three numbers salvaged from the Airmen wreckage, the others being Del Reeves' *Looking At The World Through A Windscreen* and *Too Much Fun*, which he wrote with Billy Farlow. There are several Kirchen cowrites among the other nine tracks, notably *Swing Fever* and *Tell Me The Reason*, but the standouts are *Cold Country Blues*, the latest in a long string of great Blackie Farrell songs recorded by Kirchen, and *Sometimes I Think* by Tommy Johnson, onetime drummer with Kirchen's Moonlighters, introduced with, "Three great guys, three great chords," the definitive motto for Kirchen, bassman Johnny Castle and drummer Jack O'Dell. JC

THE BLASTERS • AMERICAN MUSIC

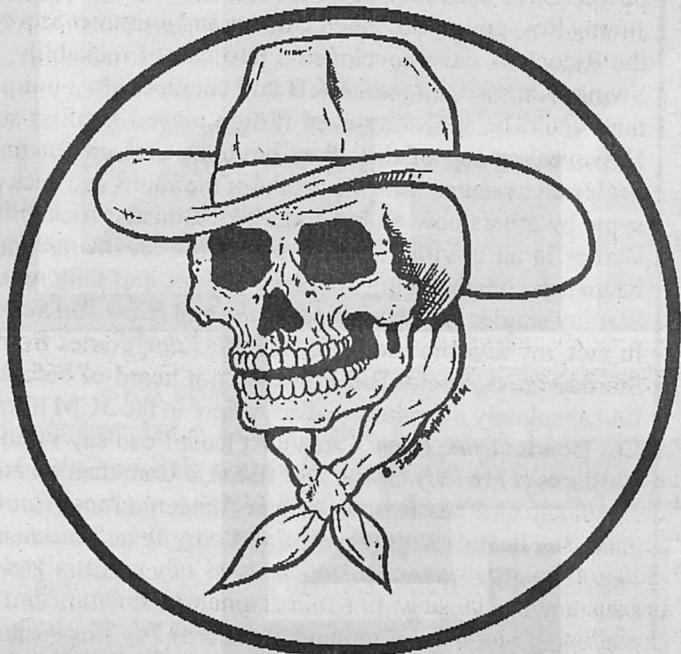
(HighTone, CD)

Unless you were in on the early days of the LA rockabilly revival or are a very dedicated collector, chances are you've never even seen a copy of The Blasters' first album. Fewer than 2000 LPs were pressed when it came out in 1980 on Rockin' Ronnie Weiser's Rollin' Rock label, and a copy in almost any condition fetches a very pretty penny. If nothing else, this reissue, with six extra unissued tracks from the same recording session in Weiser's garage, gives the rest of us a chance to judge its esoteric reputation as their best. Dave Alvin's opening title track spells out the band's parameters, "We got Louisiana boogie and the Delta Blues, we got country swingin', rockabilly too, we got jazz, Country Western and Chicago Blues," though the more poetic "Howls from the desert, screams from the slums" is just as apt. Though there are five Dave Alvin originals, including *Marie, Marie* and *Barn Burning*, one by Phil Alvin and another they cowrote, the band's dynamic is well illustrated by their covers, Bill Haley's *Real Rock Drive*, Bobby 'Blue' Bland's *Barefoot Rock*, Freddy Fender's *Crazy Baby*, Jimmie Rodgers & Elsie McWilliams' *Never No More Blues*, The Hollywood Flames' *Buzz Buzz Buzz*, Magic Sam's *21 Days In Jail*, Warren Smith's *I Fell In Love*, Howlin' Wolf's *So Glad* and Big Joe Williams' *Lone Wolf*. The problem here is The Blasters' were so influential, it's hard to put aside the subsequent work they and others built from this foundation, on top of which I never really cared for Phil Alvin's vocals and have developed a real affection, limitations notwithstanding, for his brother's. Still, there's some great material here, and, of course, 19 tracks worth of Dave Alvin's sensational guitar playing. JC

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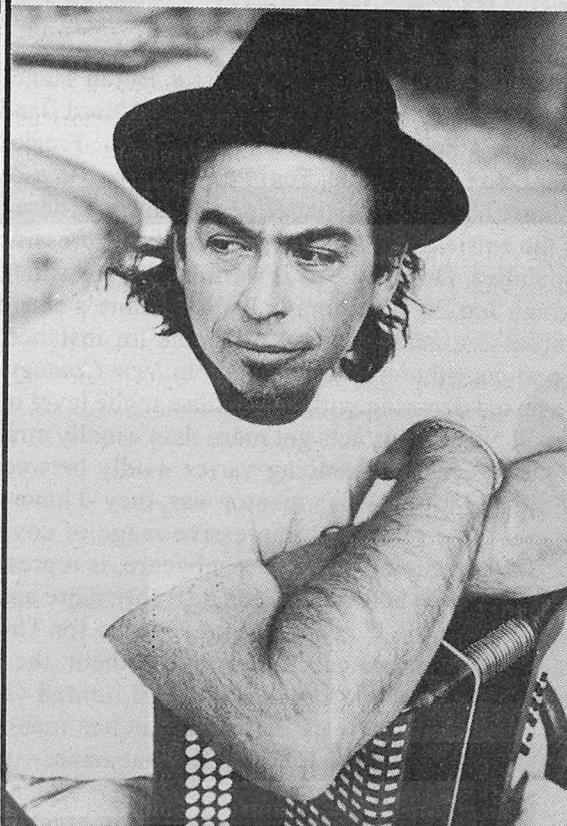
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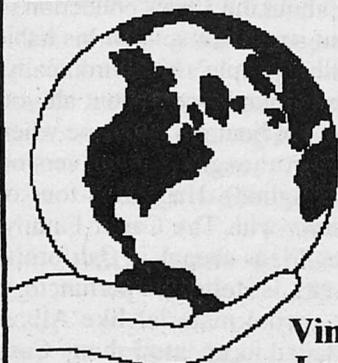
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3CM RECORD REVIEWS

MUSICHOUND • COUNTRY: THE ESSENTIAL ALBUM GUIDE

(Visible Ink, paperback)

His for Merle Haggard, Emmylou Harris et al, but also for Butch Hancock, Wayne Hancock, High Noon, Tish Hinojosa, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Cornell Hurd Band and Walter Hyatt. A fair illustration of this guide's depth, while Ronnie Dawson, Freakwater, Chris Gaffney, Jimmy LaFave, DL Menard, Jo Carol Pierce, Toni Price, Townes Van Zandt and the Waco Brothers give further indication of how broadly it defines 'Country.' These dimensions, and the resolute egalitarianism of the entries, make a very good initial impression, but closer scrutiny reveals some curious anomalies. Our Guys, as it were, and indie artists in general, get fairly objective treatment (though Joe Ely and Jimmie Dale Gilmore's entries are pretty lame), but major label garbage, unless vulnerably passé, Alabama for instance, is handled with kid gloves. Some of the 40-odd contributors—among whom *New Country* staffers are massively overrepresented—have raised damning with faint praise to the level of a minor art form, but for the most part successful Nash Vegas acts get more than usually straightforward blow jobs. The haphazard 'Influences' cross-referencing varies wildly between valid and laughable—both Ray Wylie Hubbard and Chris Wall's mentor was, they'd have you believe, Jerry Jeff Walker! More consequential, the relatively impressive range of coverage is real ragged round the edges. Tex-Mex, flagged on the cover as a subgenre, is represented solely by Flaco Jimenez—Mingo Saldivar and Janie C Ramirez, considerably more apropos in this context, don't get a look in. Judging from the Category Index, entries for The Hackberry Ramblers, Steve Riley and Wayne Toups were axed, but even with them, the coverage of Cajun would still have been desultory. The indices in general are of limited value, Record Labels, for instance, provides contact details for very few of the indies mentioned in the entries, and while I'd have been astonished to find 3CM under Magazines—which opens with *Billboard* for fuck's sake—it's a bit odd, if only because its editor was a contributor, that *No Depression* isn't there either. Conceptually superior to the Country Music Foundation's *Country On CD* in many ways, such as including imports and often recommending out of print albums, even LPs, while taking majors to task for neglect or mismanagement of back catalogs, its main strength, the acceptance of alternative, insurgent and traditional country, is also its main weakness. It would be futile to ask for intellectual rigor or a critical apparatus in a work of this kind, but recommending albums by The Eagles and Fred Eaglesmith or Ray Condo and Confederate Railroad, just two of many bizarre sets of alphabetical neighbors, as if they were making comparable, rather than utterly contradictory, music, creates a paradox on which the book ultimately breaks. Still, if very misleading, it's very useful if you already know the field, and can keep from gagging on the Nash Vegas entries. JC

ROBBIE FULKS • SOUTH MOUTH

(Bloodshot, CD)

Given that, on the strength of his terrific Bloodshot album *Country Love Songs*, Fulks has signed to Geffen, there's an all but irresistible temptation to label this one 'Transitional,' defined in *Honest John's How To Read Music* as "worse than the last one but not as bad as the next." This would, of course, be horribly unfair, but the best I'm willing to offer is "not as good as the last one but bet your life better than anything Geffen will come up with." One has only to contrast *Fuck This Town*, a quintessentially Bloodshotian salute to Nashville, with *Busy Not Crying*, which could easily be a hit for any hat act, to see the dichotomy between where Fulks is coming from and where he's heading. Similarly, *Dirty-Mouth Flo* and the sardonic *I Told Her Lies* are classic Insurgent Country twang, but *I Was Just Leaving* could be filler on any Nashville album. Fulks demonstrates his considerable talents as a singer, songwriter and electric guitarist on a diverse album that sandwiches honky tonk, Southern rock and swing between a shuffle and a folk ballad, but somehow those talents now seem much more ordinary, if that makes any sense. JC

RECKLESS KELLY • MILLICAN

(Cold Springs, CD)

Seven months in Austin and these five youngsters, whose debut is named after the town, population 1, in their native Oregon where they played their first gig, have a fanatical following, two weekly residencies, gig all over Texas, open for the likes of Todd Snider, Big Sandy and Robert Earl Keen, share a booking agent with Terry Allen and are the first signing to Chris Wall's fledgling label, complete with publicist. In other words, they're doing a hell of a lot better than people who've been here a hell of a lot longer. Reckless Kelly, whose name is taken from the Australian outlaw, took what might be called the Bad Livers route—work your butts off, playing anywhere, anytime, for half of nothing if needs be, until you reach critical mass, a further similarity being their freewheeling range, from Ray Price to AC/DC. Trick-is, to make this work, you need to start with a certain amount of actual talent and if they're prettier than the Livers—the press kit says "each one, according to the league of young female fans surrounding them, has looks," and Mary Cutrufello refers to them in her liner notes as "good-looking," and who am I to argue?—they also have talent and dedication to spare. Fronted by Willy Braun, who also plays rhythm guitars and writes most of the songs, with his brother Cody fiddle, mandolin, harp and harmonies, Casey Pollock guitars, Jay Nazz drums/percussion and Chris Schelske bass and harmonies plus some songwriting, these lowtwentysomethings, most of whom grew up in family bands, are fine players, though less convincing in electric mode than acoustic, whose pop sound is mitigated by country, bluegrass and blues influences. If they're a little light on grit, and the production seems a tad out of focus, this is still a very promising debut. JC

RAY CONDO & HIS RICOCHETS

DOOR TO DOOR MANIAC

(Joaquin, CD)

Vancouver-based Condo presents us with some fascinating paradoxes. On the face of it, The Ricochets are a cover band, but they have nothing whatsoever in common with cover bands. Their second album has no original material, but it's one of the most original albums you'll hear this, or most any other, year. That material labels them a retro band, but they have more immediacy than any 'progressive' outfit. They dig their material out of the archives, but they don't just dust it off, they infuse it with fire and energy. Tight as a drum, they're relaxed and nonchalant. As you may gather, I have a lot of use for Ray Condo & His Ricochets. Formed in 1995 out of fragments of Montreal's Hardrock Goners (singer and saxman Condo and upright bass player Clive Jackson) and Five Star Hillbillies (steel guitarist Jimmy Roy, guitarist Stephen Nikleva and drummer Steve Taylor), the Ricochets have developed a pastiche of rockabilly, Western Swing, Kansas City jazz, R&B and country into a unique sound that would be appealing even if they played familiar standards. However, on top of this, they have a penchant for unearthing neglected treasures from the depths of the vaults and back catalogs, some by artists now all but forgotten. Houston rockabilly Glenn Barber is an obvious case in point; his *Ice Water* was on the Ricochets' debut *Swing Brother Swing!* and they return to his Starday singles for *Shadow My Baby* and *Have You Seen Mabel?* In fact, my favorite track, *Feeling No Pain*, comes from another Starday artist, Rocky Bill Ford, I'd not heard of before and can find absolutely no mention of anywhere in the 3CM library. Ditto Lee Bonds (*Done Gone Crazy*). At least I can say I know of Tex Williams (*I Lost My Gal In The Yukon*, a Canadian revision of his *I Lost My Gal In Memphis*), Gene Vincent (*Jump Back, Honey, Jump Back*), Bob Wills (*I'm Feelin' Bad.*), Texas bluesman Frankie Lee Sims (*She Likes To Boogie Real Low*), Billie Holiday (her own *Tell Me More* and *I Can't Believe That You're In Love With Me*, which she was one of many to record), Big Boy Arthur Crudup (*Shout, Sister, Shout*) and Dorsey Burnette (*Great Shakin' Fever*). One thing that has to be said for this approach is that there isn't one second rate, make up the numbers song. Recorded in mono, hence the full, rich sound, with little, if any, evidence, of overdubs, this has all the vitality and panache of The Ricochets on stage. JC

SONNY JAMES

YOUNG LOVE: THE CLASSIC HITS

MERLE HAGGARD

THE LAND OF MANY CHURCHES

LORNE GREENE

ON THE PONDEROSA

(Razor & Tie, CDs)

After decades of absorbing indies, major label vaults are bulging with material they quite often don't even realize they own, and it's hard to see how you can go far wrong with reissues, but Razor & Tie, a label I generally admire, seems to be scraping the bottom of the barrel. Actually two different barrels, James' 1953-71 singles and Haggard's mid-70s double LP were on Capitol, while Greene's album is compiled from five mid-60s RCA LPs. The best, or anyway funniest, thing about the James collection is Rich Kienzle's gallant attempt to put a positive spin on his habit of rushing out competing copies of other people's hits—ironically, he called himself 'The Southern Gentleman'—and about all you really need to know about him is he got bent out of shape when Tab Hunter covered *Young Love*, even though his own version was also a cover (of Ric Cartey's original). Haggard's tour of American churches, two in Tennessee, with The Carter Family, two, including the San Quentin State Prison chapel, in California, with The Strangers and Bonnie Owens, is stolid and perfunctory, never catching fire despite great gospel material like Albert Brumley's *Turn Your Radio On*. A failed foray into Johnny Cash territory. Lorne Greene's faux cowboy turds should have been flushed away before they were released, let alone reissued. Even for lovers of kitsch, this one's really out there. JC

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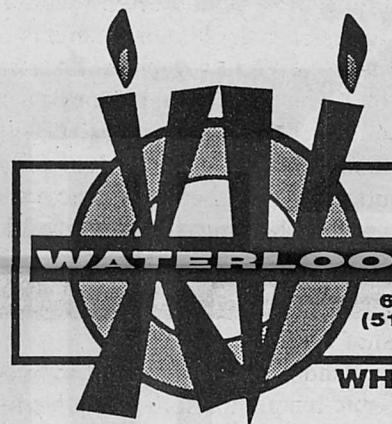
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HIGH JOHN THE CONQUEROR SOAP

So, Lafayette. Given how hospitable and helpful the City, in the person of Ms Kelly Strenge (a name to note if you're in the media) of the Convention & Visitors Bureau, has been to us, I have no qualms about singing for my shrimp etouffe. This year they parked us in Sunny Meade, a very classy Victorian mansion in Scott, housing a Cajun B&B, which we suspect was slightly outside our normal price range, but we weren't about to demand a downgrade. Scott has somewhat the same relationship to Lafayette as Round Rock to Austin, only it's a bit different. From his balcony, our host Charlie Primeaux, who's very up on his Cajun music, was able to point out the homes of Walter Mouton and Zachary Richard.

◆ The festival was a blast, hot, dusty and wonderful. Also crowded, and the local paper was suggesting this may have been the last free, unfenced one. Apart from the music, which was predictably splendid, though Thomas Fields was rather more impressive than I expected, my favorite moments were 1: Barry Ancelet telling me of the time a band sang in English and the Lafayette Jaycees, who sponsor the event, came to the organizers demanding to know what the hell was going on (needless to say, that band was never invited back). 2: A highly amused Dan Forte informing me that when he checked in backstage, he was handed a copy of 3CM. I'd like to think of this a validation of the guide, which certainly served us well, though one Austin couple told us they were disappointed by the food at McGee's in Henderson.

◆ Acadiana Snippets: seems some Louisiana radio stations still won't play Zachary Richard because he was a Vietnam draft dodger, but I was also told he started out as an attorney, which seems a far blacker mark against him. The Balfa family is of Scottish descent, their name a corruption of Balfour (this is the kind of utterly useless trivia I find fascinating).

◆ On the dark side of Cajun life, we found out why La Poussiere in Breaux Bridge is tourist-free. A couple three years ago they refused to admit a black couple who arrived with a tour group, which sparked a boycott by four operators, plus the spurned couple turned out to be vacationing lawyers, so now it's nominally a private club. Needless to say, much as we'd have loved to see Walter Mouton & The Scott Playboys in their home base, we found something else to do that night. Easy enough, Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys were at Grant Street Dancehall, with, as it turned out, CC Adcock and The Iguanas saxmen sitting in. As Riley remarked afterwards, "We got the rock & roll out of our system, so tomorrow we can go to the festival and play straight Cajun."

◆ The only benefits I really approve of are the ones musicians put on to help each other out. Recently, surgeons took a pound and a half of tumor out of Mandy Mercier, blessedly nonmalignant, and she's recovering fast but, of course, like virtually all musicians, she has no insurance. There'll be a benefit for her in Nashville on October 14th, with Lucinda Williams, Steve Forbert, David Ball, Dana Cooper and more, and another at The Broken Spoke in Austin on November 9th, with Lou Ann Barton, Marcia Ball, Toni Price, Jimmy LaFave, Troy Campbell, Jon Dee Graham, Libbi Bosworth, Ana Egge and Champ Hood & The Threadgill's Troubadors (plus some special guests she's not allowed to mention yet), so mark that in your calendar.

◆ The easiest way of racking up enormous virtual debt is simply standing in front of a display of Bear Family box sets. Next easiest is leafing through an Arhoolie catalog, so if you send off for the latest and, of course, biggest edition (Arhoolie, 10341 San Pablo Ave, El Cerrito; \$3), brace yourself for a major attack of lust. In his foreword, Chris Strachwitz adds yet another ironic tale of inadvertent support from the commercial

sector for his roots label. Long ago, a penniless band gave him the publishing on a song in exchange for the use of his field recording equipment, then Country Joe & The Fish appeared at Woodstock and *Feel Like I'm Fixin' To Die Rag* was used on on both the record and in the film and Strachwitz was able to buy the building his label and Down Home Music still occupy. Then, after years of litigation, he finally forced The Rolling Stones to cough up royalties for Fred McDowell's *You Gotta Move*. Latest twist is that Arhoolie owns half of KC Douglas' *Mercury Boogie*, so money's been flowing in from Alan Jackson's #1 hit version. I still think Jackson should be taken round back and have the shit beaten out of him, but this does go to show even the darkest cloud has a silver lining.

◆ Reviewing the reissue of Evan Johns' 1986 LP, I couldn't help noticing that it was recorded at three different Austin studios and released on a local label—and all four are long gone. What do we learn from this, comrades?

◆ Much disparaged for their cheerleader approach to alternative country—as a German DJ put it, "My criticism is, there is no criticism"—*No Depression* have finally decided to get nasty. So who do they pick on? Some of what Bloodshot so incisively refer to as "tepid country rock crapola and third-rate, angst-ridden indie posturing"? Not hardly. Would you believe Terry Allen?!?! I don't know, or much care, what Bill Sacks' qualifications are, but while not getting it is something I've often admitted to, and as often been accused of, I'm simply not in his class. His savaging of *Smokin' The Dummy and Bloodlines* is so fatuous it transcends mere difference of opinion. At one point, I did wonder if it was meant as a satire on effete, pompous, overintellectualized reviewing (in which case, it would be nothing short of brilliant), but no, he's just full of shit. Try this, "Allen's songwriting succumbs to allowing the rage it's meant to contain to be rendered inarticulate because he settles for the comfort of workaday language while attempting to impart some sort of foreboding about workaday lives." If any of you can translate this into intelligible English, I'd love to know what the fuck it's supposed to mean.

◆ Talking about not getting it, the Roman Catholic Church is putting on a concert at the World Eucharist Congress in Bologna, Italy. "The Pope's idea," said a spokesman, "is to get closer to young people through pop music." So who do they have headlining? Bob Dylan! Well, John Paul George & Ringo is 77, so maybe he thinks of fiftysomethings as "young people" and vice versa. Wonder if he can convert Bobbie to Catholicism. Why not? He's been everything else.

◆ Key man is a concept you often find in entertainment business contracts, it means that if a specific individual leaves the agency, label or whatever, the contract becomes void. I've often thought the basic idea should be extended to bands. Thus, when Duane Allman and Lowell George died, The Allman Brothers and Little Feat should have ceased to exist, at least under those names. A new album by the Flying Burrito Brothers only reinforces this opinion. The name should have been retired a quarter of a century ago, if not when Gram Parsons at least after Chris Hillman's departure. At least The Grateful Dead understood this.

◆ Not having dealt with them for many moons, I'd forgotten how difficult Shanachie Records can be. Soon as I put the phone down—I was trying to lay hands on what I'm told is a killer Richard Shindell album—I flashed back to something a friend once said about the label, "They remind me of Thurber's remark about Cleveland being the only city he knew that was under the civic delusion it was being followed."

◆ Dunno about you guys, but I loathed and despised *Candle In The Wind* back in 1973, and rewriting it for poor dimbulb Di doesn't make it any better. Like they

say, you can't polish a turd. You may not want to go around saying things like this, I just wanted you to know you're not alone.

◆ The gremlins switched numbers in the address shown in Polk, Barton & Towhead's advert last issue for their album, *The Way Things Are*. It should have been: Iuka Records, PO Box 9146, Austin, TX 78766. Let me doublecheck that . . .

◆ Until someone specifically complimented me on it the other day, I didn't think getting a magazine out each and every month was too big a deal. It's rather amazing to realize I'm closing on the 100th issue—guess I ought to do something to mark the occasion, let me get back to you on that—but cranking the bastards out more or less on time, well that's the gig, know what I mean? However, this seems an old-fashioned way of looking at it, or something, because the current trend among Austin mags seems to be to appear at random intervals. I've lost count of how many have come and gone in the last eight years, but time was when they died, they stayed dead, now they flicker on and off like cheap fluorescents. However, *Austin Blues Monthly*/Bi-Monthly/Quarterly/whenever does finally seem to have gone under, its publisher, from advocating the Devil's music, now, I gather, putting out a Christian music magazine, which is moderately hilarious. Anyway, I kind of backed off covering blues for a while on rather dubious division of labor grounds, but I'm easing, cautiously, back into it this month, so bear with me while I get my bearings, and reestablish my lapsed connexions.

◆ At a recent show, Ray Wylie Hubbard came up with two great, and very revealing, lines about the songwriter's craft. Introducing one of his, shall we say, lesser works, he remarked, "This is the kind of song you write while you're waiting for the real ones to come along." Later on, facing up to the inevitability of playing *Redneck Mother* for the millionth time, he wryly observed that his best advice to would-be songwriters was "Never write anything you don't want to have to sing every night for the next 25 years."

◆ Joking about the contention, in *Country: The Essential Albums* (see Reviews), that Ray Wylie Hubbard and Chris Wall were influenced by Jerry Jeff Walker, a friend and I punned around with 'under the influence,' but couldn't make it come our right. So I throw the idea open, maybe you can do better.

◆ The Third Coast-friendly DJ list is getting to be as complete as I can make it without running hard up against the law of diminishing returns (though more suggestions, tips, etc are still welcome). Anyway, the full version, so far, is now available in faxable and emailable form, including these stragglers—

ALABAMA

Kristen 'Hepkitten' Knotts *Psychobilly Freakout* • WEGL, 91.1fm, Auburn, AL ("A rare medium well done"); Tuesday, 8.30-10pm. Mix of rockabilly, psychobilly, garage and swing. Being a girl, I like to promote female acts as well as lesser known and regional performers.

• Kristen Knotts, 136A Toomer St, Auburn, AL 36830; wegl@mail.auburn.edu

CALIFORNIA

Bruce Ross *Sunny Side Up* • KZSU 90.1fm, Stanford; Sunday, 9am-noon. Alternative and Texas country, folk, bluegrass, roots, honky tonk, western swing.

• Bruce Ross, KZSU, PO Box 6509, Stanford, CA 94309; (c/o) karaw@kzsu.stanford.edu

FLORIDA

Paul MacAulay, Sherry Taylor King, Randy Wynne, Sid Flannery, Denny Reisinger *Traffic Jam* • WMNF, 88.5fm, Tampa, Monday-Friday, 4-6pm. Roots rock, zydeco, blues, bluegrass, folk, honky tonk and more.

• Linda Reisinger, WMNF, 1210 MLK Jr Blvd, Tampa, FL 33603; LindaLu@WMNF.org

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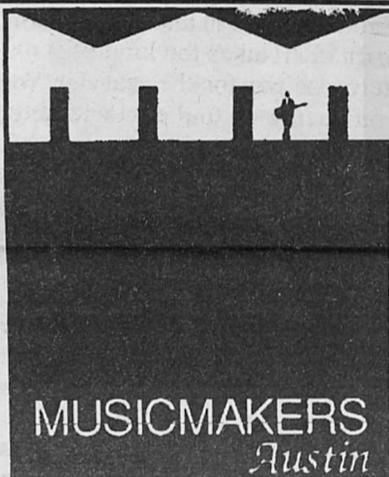
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THE PRICE OF INDEPENDENTS

Dodging gross generalization, some musicians play for the fun of it and maybe a little extra dough, and some can shrewdly assess their own and their music's commercial potential, but on the whole musicians dream of fame and fortune. Who can blame them? It's one thing to slog your way up a career ladder, quite another to be in an open-ended business which can almost literally catapult you to the top overnight, one thing to think your supervisor's a moron, another to feel that with just a little luck you could be bigger than those no-talents in the charts. Like actors, or, come to that, writers, ambitious musicians tend to have well developed, if not overdeveloped, egos—fair enough, if you don't believe in yourself, you're fucked right there—so they obsess on exposure, figuring if they get around enough, sooner or later they're bound to be offered a record contract, which, of course, is why they're willing to pour money down ratholes like SXSW.

◆ Exposure is basically the *raison d'être* of indie labels. There may well be many people who'd rather have someone else take care of the chores involved in putting a record out, but for the most part indies are seen as stepping stones, providing product to lay on venues in the quest for higher profile bookings, and shop to majors in the hope they'll pick up if not the act at least some of the original material. Sure as shit nobody's in it for the money—the bottom line of an indie release is that there is no bottom line. The only way to turn a buck on one is to buy copies of your own record from the label, for anything between five and ten dollars a pop, and sell them at gigs, don't hold your breath waiting for royalty checks.

◆ This, to be fair, isn't usually the indies' fault. There was a time when outright crooks like Morris Levy could do very nicely indeed robbing musicians blind, but these days most indies are shoestring operations run, in my experience, by very amiable, honest and dedicated people. Marginalized by the majors' domination of radio and the media, they're usually doing well to break even on their releases, let alone make enough to pass anything on to the artist. Mind you, by the time accountants have massaged the figures, major label artists don't fare much better.

◆ The indie issue came into fairly sharp focus when Butch Hancock told me he was putting his next record out on his own label after two on Sugar Hill and remarked, "I really need to make some money on this one." In other words, a universally respected veteran singer-songwriter with a sizeable and devoted international following can't afford to stay on a label with a sterling reputation for rectitude and probity.

◆ While their releases can be, but sure aren't necessarily, more professional than DIY projects and in certain cases lend the artist some credibility by association, what indies offer is rather spotty national distribution and a certain amount of publicity and promotion. However, these are precisely the things that eat their lunch and ensure that even the crumbs won't make it down to the bottom of the food chain, ie the artists. The exposure vs money dilemma is well illustrated by Asylum Street Spankers' move from Watermelon to Freedom—they figure that selling a few copies locally and by mail order, but getting paid for them, is a better deal than selling far more nationally but never seeing a dime.

◆ Even if, at this stage in his career, exposure probably isn't a big priority for Hancock, his rationale is chillingly concise, "It's simple arithmetic. You can figure it out pretty quick." At the same time, of course, plenty, if not most, DIY albums won't make any money either—according to one statistic I've heard, of all the records put out from every source, some 3% sell more than 1000 copies, which is a pretty bloodcurdling thought. Having got this far, I wish I could offer some positive thoughts, but these are problems I can point out but have no solutions to.

JC

BUTCH HANCOCK

Funnier than Socrates, wiser than Stan Laurel, Butch Hancock emerges from the wilderness clutching a piece of plastic on which are engraved 13 brand new songs. The questions prompted by *You Coulda Walked Around The World* mostly center round the ghost town of Terlingua, to the edge of which he moved his Airstream trailer late last year. "There's about 12-15 people live there, maybe three or four hundred in Big Bend Park, I think 8,500 in the whole of Brewster County. They're a great bunch of people. It's as busy and social out there as in Austin." One of Hancock's neighbors, incidentally, is Spider, an artist in concrete who made the Socrates and Hardy sculptures, together a near perfect summary of the man and his art.

◆ While Hancock has been many things, from videographer to white water rafter to shopkeeper, and still is most of them, many of us look on him primarily as a source of great songs, and even he accepts that in recent years his pace had slowed considerably. "Hell, yes, I outright stopped a few times. Never worried about writer's block though. Like Jimmie says, sometimes the molecules just are lined up right. I was busy doing other things and often those things would lead back to songwriting. I never did write in any kind of linear order, bounced back and forth. Anyway, how many songs does a man need?"

◆ How much is his resurgence due to Terlingua? "Well, I knew I wasn't getting away from anything. If I had any bullshit, I'd be taking it there with me. I wasn't trying to find salvation or anything, just sometimes you need to walk out of the room, get some fresh air. One of the best times in my life was driving a tractor for my dad. The amazing thing was that West Texas sky. I got to know the clouds and the critters and the wind blew through my ears. Getting back under that sky has been a major opening up for me, shaking the cobwebs loose. So, the first thing is the fresh air and elbow room, room for the spirit, where everything's fresh and new every morning."

◆ "At the same time, the desert's not all blooms and blossoms. They say everything in a desert either bites you, sticks you or stings you, still, you could say the same thing about a city too, but sometimes there's a real alien side, right on the edge of terrifying, and I feel like the Airstream is a space ship I've stepped out of onto another planet. When they showed the first pictures of Mars, everybody round here recognized them, 'Hell, I know where that place is, just four miles down the road.'"

◆ "One of the first things that happens, you absolutely lose all sense of calendar. You develop a real different mindset, you get out of a sense of time and into a sense of space. You get realistic about priorities, fact is, hell, you don't *have* to do anything. What we perceive as normal changes, though I don't know if there is such a thing as normal. In the city, you get so cramped for time. There are only ever going to be 24 hours in a day, but your days are consumed with so-called commitments. Out in Terlingua there are fewer distractions, life's much simpler."

◆ Having reactivated Rainlight, he's brimming with plans. "There's more coming, definitely. More new material, but first I'm thinking of making this album all over again, same songs, with a band and full production, balls to the wall, rockin' out Sunspot activity. And I'd like to get some of the old albums out on CD, *Wind's Dominion* 'll be the first."

◆ Comparing this album with his debut, *West Texas Waltzes*, he sees himself as having spiralled back to a place close to where he started, "A Lubbock boy out peddling his albums again. Like Ponty Bone says, 'We sell hundreds of albums in isolated pockets of good taste.' Ultimately, fame and fortune are small potatoes—what little experience I've had of them." But if the Socratic side of his mind is in charge when he muses on "The fine line between being at peace and trying to push some of this stuff," Stan Laurel breaks into, "Peace of mind can't be borrowed" with "but it can be bought! Buy my record!"

JC

BUTCH HANCOCK

YOU COULDA WALKED AROUND THE WORLD

(Rainlight, CD)

Going back to his own label, Hancock also reverts to the approach of the album that launched it, and his career, back in 1978. Like *West Texas Waltzes*, this is solo and acoustic, with few frills (one afterthought harmonica overdub) and no time wasted. Cut at Joe Ely's Spur studio, it's essentially a campfire recording, and if it has a couple more songs than *WTW*, well, that's not really the point, is it? Occasionally I felt it would have been nice if Jesse Taylor had been sitting round the campfire too, but that's a real minor quibble. The crux, of course, is the songs and if there are obvious clues to Hancock's move to Terlingua, more subtle are the philosophical complexities and the intimations of mortality. Not to say that Hancock hasn't always been a profound songwriter, but this album plumbs new depths with very little of the witty absurdism and puckish wordplay that lightened most of his earlier work. Far be it from me to accuse him of messages, but there does seem to be a greater degree of urgency in these desert spawned songs, particularly the title track, which addresses the ways people waste their lives. That song, *Bare Foot Prints*, *These Long Sunsets* and *Red Blood* strike me as being, at the absolute minimum, on a par with his all-time best, others, like the corkscrewing "it takes all kinds" catalogs *Chase* and *Hidin' In the Hills*, and the rather mystifying *Black Irish Rose*, I'm still thinking about, but on the other hand, if they were on somebody else's album, I'd have been pretty damned impressed. So that's enough to be able to say unequivocally—buy this record.

JC

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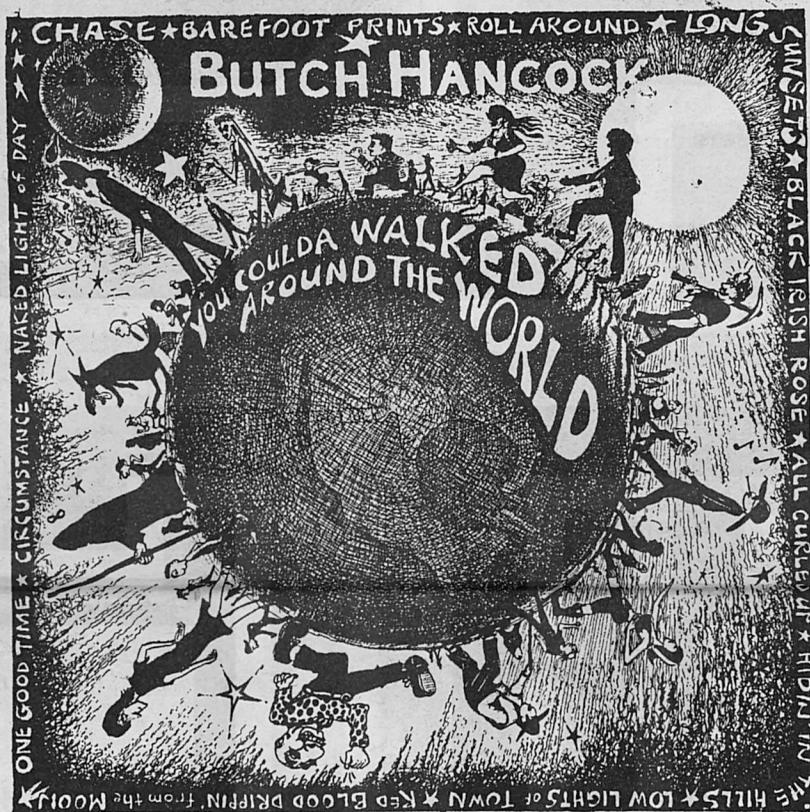
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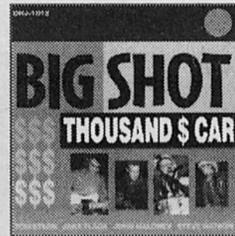
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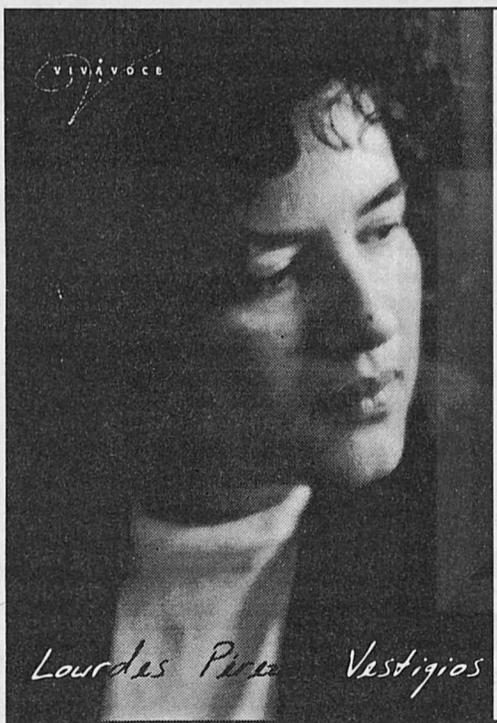
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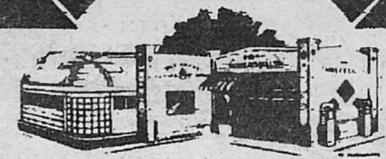
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