

# 3<sup>rd</sup> COAST MUSIC

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#95/184 DECEMBER 2004



**JOHN THE REVEALATOR**  
**CHARLES EARLE's B-Sides**  
**FAR #64**  
**ROOTS BIRTHS & DEATHS**

## REVIEWS



(or not)

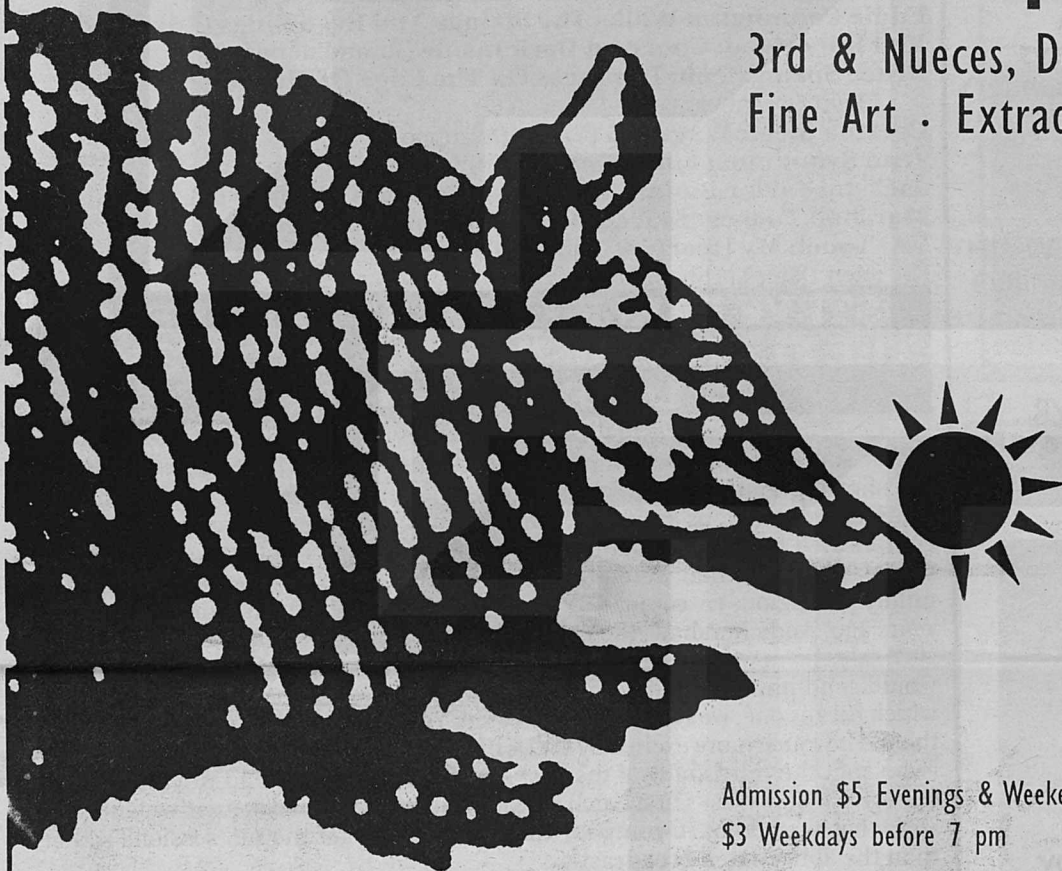
KEN BURKE  
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IRIS DeMENT  
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STEVE EARLE  
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THE FLATLANDERS  
•  
HOPPED UP!  
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ROBERT EARL KEEN  
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LI'L BIT & THE  
CUSTOMATICS  
•  
TONY MASERATI  
•  
LISA O'KANE  
•  
CHRIS STUART  
& BACKCOUNTRY  
•  
SUSAN TEDESCHI  
•  
JOHN VANDIVER  
•  
BETSY-DAWN  
WILLIAMS



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Tuesday 14 ..... Ray Wylie Hubbard  
Wednesday 15 ... Austin Lounge Lizards  
Thursday 16 ..... Terri Hendrix  
Friday 17 ..... Jimmy LaFave  
Saturday 18 ..... Van Wilks  
Sunday 19 ..... W. C. Clark  
Monday 20 ..... Ray Benson  
Tuesday 21 ..... Albert & Gage  
Wednesday 22 ... The Greencards  
Thursday 23 ..... Ponty Bone  
Friday 24 ..... Texana Dames

## AFTERNOON PERFORMANCES

*Weekends 12:30 pm to 3 pm*

Saturday 11 .... Sara Hickman  
Sunday 12 .... Ruthie Foster  
Saturday 18 .... The Resentments  
Sunday 19 .... The Imperial Golden  
Crown Harmonizers

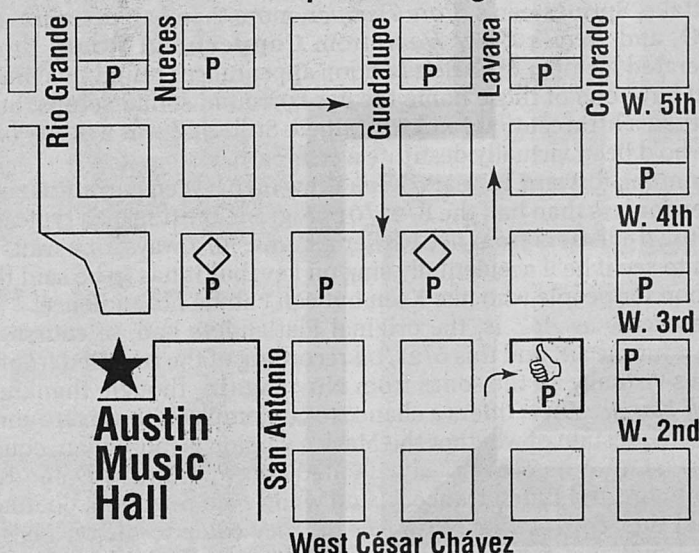
*Weekends 3:30 pm to 6 pm*

Saturday 11 ... Eliza Gilkyson  
Sunday 12 .... Toni Price  
Saturday 18 ... South Austin Jug Band  
Sunday 19 .... Marcia Ball &  
Sarah Elizabeth Campbell

## Christmas Eve

2:30-6 p.m. .... Shelley King  
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# FREEFORM AMERICAN ROOTS #64

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## #1 NEKO CASE: THE TIGERS HAVE SPOKEN

(Anti/Mint)

- \*AN/\*BR/\*BS/DF/\*DP/\*GM/\*MO/\*PP/\*SR/\*T&C/\*UC/\*TW
- 2 VA: Hard-Headed Woman; A Celebration Of Wanda Jackson (Bloodshot) \*LB/\*RMS/\*R78/\*TR/\*XR
- 3 Tim Grimm: Names (Wind River) \*AA/\*BE/\*BL/\*BW/\*DB/\*LG
- 4 Chris Stuart & Backcountry: Mojave River (Backcountry) \*AR/\*CD/\*EB/\*KR/\*MDT
- 5 Blaze Foley: Oval Room (Lost Art) \*CP/\*DO/\*JB
- 6 Jesse Dayton: Country Soul Brother (Stag) \*BF/\*JZ
- 7 Buddy Miller: Universal United House Of Prayer (New West) \*CS/\*JS/\*N&T
- 8 CC Adcock: Lafayette Marquis (Yep Roc) \*JF/\*JM
- 9 Fred Eaglesmith: Dusty (A Major Label) \*BB/\*FS/\*TA
- 10= Alison Krauss & Union Station: Lonely Runs Both Ways (Rounder)
- VA: Texas Unplugged Vol 1 (Palo Duro) \*DA/\*RT
- 11 Kasey Chambers: Wayward Angel (EMI) \*HP/\*RR
- 12 Ray Lamontagne: Trouble (RCA/Stone Dwarf) \*GC/\*SB
- 13 Johnny Bush: Honky Tonic (BGM) \*SC
- 14 Amber Digby: Music From The Honky Tonks (self) \*EW/\*JH
- 15 Magnolia Sisters: Apres Faire Le Boogie Woogie (Rounder) \*TG
- 16= Hayes Carll: Little Rock (Highway 87) \*DWB/\*MM
- Iris DeMent: Lifeline (Flariella) \*T&L
- 17= Eleven Hundred Springs: Bandwagon (Palo Duro) \*WR
- Frog Holler: The High, Highs & The Low, Lows (Zobird) \*TH
- 18= The Gourds: Blood Of The Ram (Eleven Thirty) \*ST
- Th' Legendary Shack Shakers: Believe (Yep Roc) \*DN
- Kimmie Rhodes: Windblown (Sunbird) \*DY
- Tony Joe White: The Heroines (Sanctuary) \*JP
- 18 Rod Picott: Girl From Arkansas (Welding Rod)
- 19 The Wailin' Jennys: 40 Days (Red House) \*SNJ
- 20= Kate Campbell: Sing Me Out (Compadre) \*RJ
- Tom Corbett: Cloudless Blue Sky (Roundhole)
- Willie Nelson: It Will Always Be (Lost Highway)
- John Pinamonti: JP3 (self) \*GS
- Ricky Skaggs: Brand New Strings (Skaggs Family)
- 21= Appalachian Picking Society (Windham Hill) \*SF
- Cowboy Jack Clement: Guess Things Happen That Way (Dualtone)
- Nashville Bluegrass Band: Twenty Year Blues (Sugar Hill) \*CL
- The Sadies: Favourite Colors (Yep Roc) \*JQB
- 22= The Barn Burners: Shot Down (Atomic Twang) \*TM
- Junior Brown: Down Home Chrome (Telarc) \*SH
- Greg Brown: In The Hills Of California (Red House) \*FW
- Richard Buckner: Dents and Shells (Merge) \*WT
- Billy Don Burns: Heroes, Friends & Other Troubled Souls (Indie Mafia)
- Craig Dillingham: Almost Yesterday (Carnival) \*RH
- John Fogerty: Deja Vu All Over Again (Geffen) \*S&D
- Alastair Moock: Let It Go (Moockshake) \*TO
- Madeleine Peyroux: Careless Love (Rounder) \*SM
- 23= Tommy Alverson: Heroes & Friends (Smith Entertainment)
- The Hoyle Brothers: Back To The Door (Loose Booty)



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**\*XX = DJ's ALBUM OF THE MONTH**

Freeform American Roots is compiled from reports provided by 139 freeform DJs in the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Uruguay. More information can be found at [www.accd.edu/tcmn/far](http://www.accd.edu/tcmn/far)

# FAR CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

Simplifying your shopping this year, you buy *one* album in bulk and give a copy to everyone on your list—which album? It seemed like a fairly easy game to run past the FAR DJs, but while they're usually not short of strong opinions, this was a bit too definite for most of them and only these few hardy souls stepped up to the plate.

JC

**CC Adcock: Lafayette Marquis** (Jon Ziegler)

**Nels Andrews: Sunday Shoes** (JC Shepard)

**Mason Brown & Chipper Thompson: Am I Born to Die:**

**An Appalachian Songbook** (Matt Schuyler)

**The Byrds: Ballad Of Easy Rider** (Jenny Huebenreiser)

**Cindy Cashdollar: Slide Show** (Joe Pareres)

**Amber Digby: Music From The Honky Tonks** (JC)

**Steve Earle: The Revolution Starts Now!** (Wesley Robertson)

**I See Hawks In LA: Grapevine** (Dan Orange. Steve Scott)

**Jerry Lee Lewis: Live At The Star-Club, Hamburg** (Rolf Heirath)

**Louvin Brothers: Tragic Songs Of Life** (Craig Lammers)

**Corb Lund Band: Five Dollar Bill** (Brian Saunderson)

**Eddie Pennington Walks The Strings And Even Sings** (Erika Brady)

**Kell Robertson: Cool And Dark Inside** (Brian Bourgoin)

**Bruce Springsteen: Darkness On The Edge Of The Edge Of Town**

(Scott Greenburg)

**Corrina Steel: Wayward** (Carrie Delzoppo)

**Jean Synodinos: Lucky** (Susanne Millsaps)

**Jackson Taylor Band: Goin' Down' Swingin'** (Eddie White)

**Marshall Tucker: Searchin' For A Rainbow** (Bruce Price)

**VA: Touch My Heart: A Tribute To Johnny Paycheck**

(Ken Date, Liz Shepherd)

## STEVE EARLE • ROBERT EARL KEEN THE FLATLANDERS • SUSAN TEDESCHI LIVE FROM AUSTIN TX

(New West DVDs/CDs [Flatlanders DVD only])

For some reason, every time I try watching *Austin City Limits*, it's always showing Faith Hill or someone else I detest, but there's no denying the range and depth of its archive of 400+ tapings. How you market it, however, is complicated by the fact that over 28 years *ACL* devolved from a cutting edge showcase for acts that weren't, and often still aren't, household names, into a mildly prestigious career marker for established and rising national acts. Some years ago, Andy Kershaw, then music buyer for Britain's Channel 4, told me an *ACL* sales team was in Europe but pushing shows by current stars, whose labels would send him all the free footage he wanted, rather than the early stuff, in which he, for one, was far more interested. You will hardly be surprised to hear that I'd be much more excited by DVDs of Townes Van Zandt and Clifton Chenier (who split the third show of the first season), Doug Sahm and Roy Buchanan, but I guess New West's first batch is more realistically aimed at existing fanbases, and what they do have going for them is that you get the full sessions rather than the abbreviated broadcasts.

To be fair, New West did go back to Steve Earle's first *ACL* appearance (9/12/86), which included all the songs on **Guitar Town** except *Someday*, plus an outtake, Springsteen's *State Trooper*, more than half of Earle's next album, **Exit O**, and *Devil's Right Hand* from **Copperhead Road**. I may have an exaggerated memory of Earle's London appearances round this time, or maybe should have one of those home theater surround sound setups, but he seems more than a little cautious and restrained. Still, *ACL* was a pretty big deal for a man who'd been virtually destitute a year earlier.

Jumping forward 14 years, Keen drew on his then current **Gravitational Forces** for less than half the 8/22/01 program, putting on a typical REK show with crowd-pleasers from five earlier albums. As always, one waits with bated breath to see if he'll accidentally sing on key, but it has to be said that this is a real boon for people who like Keen but can't abide his audience.

Venerable as *ACL* is, the original Flatlanders had, of course, broken up before it hit the air, and this 6/21/02 recording of the reunited frontline, which includes virtually all the songs from **Now Again**, though, thankfully, not the dire *All You Are Love*, offers a chance to contemplate, in private and at leisure, the vexed question of whether the Mark 2 version is more than, equal to or less than the sum of its enormously talented parts. Still, this is Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock, and while even they can't do much with the material they cowrote for **Now Again**, they come to life on Ely's *I Had My Hopes Up High*, Gilmore's *Dallas*, Terry Allen's *Give Me A Ride To Heaven Boy*, *Sittin' On Top Of The World* and Townes Van Zandt's *White Freightliner Blues*. It's interesting to see how much Gilmore dominates the proceedings, but then the original group was not The Flatlanders but Jimmie Dale Gilmore & The Flatlanders, something which tends to get glossed over these days.

The fact that the minimally talented Susan Tedeschi has been on it three times, including 6/17/03, and Debbie Davis not once tells you a good deal about both *Austin City Limits* and the state of the blues.

Still, at least Tedeschi's DVD and CD are easy to rate ('piss on this noise'), as are the Earle and Keen CDs (\*\*\*.5). The problem with the other DVDs is that I don't imagine I'll ever watch any of them again as none are truly inspired or exciting, but then that's *ACL* for you. Ideally, unless you're a hardcore Earle, Keen or Flatlanders fan, you want someone else to buy these so you can borrow them for a day or two, watch them and then return them.

JC



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— John Conquest, *3rd Coast Music*, June 2004



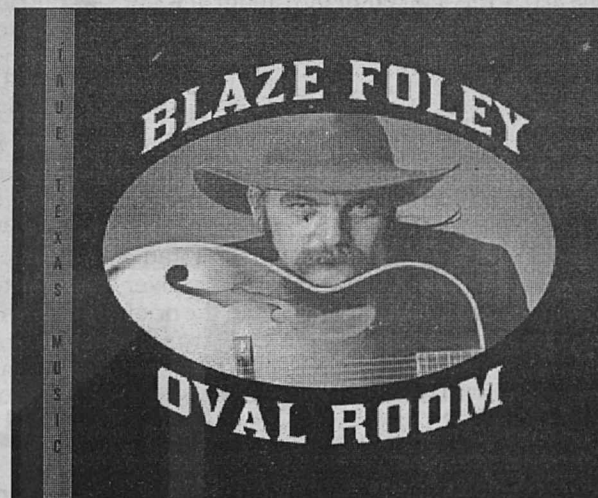
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## CHRIS STUART & BACKCOUNTRY

### MOJAVE RIVER

(Backcountry \*\*\*\*)

How much overlap, if any, is there between Bluegrass and Americana fans? This is the question facing Stuart and his SoCal group who, with ironclad credentials, play numerous Bluegrass festivals and events, but whose Americana leanings have created a glass ceiling they know will keep them out of the top level. However, for many in the Americana world which they'd like to penetrate, a little bluegrass goes an awful long way. Creating different sets for different audiences is relatively easy, making a crossover album a good deal harder, and doing well in the FAR chart, not exactly a Bluegrass-friendly environment, is somewhat ambiguous, one recalls how John Lilly got nowhere in either Bluegrass or Americana charts but took FAR by storm. Of course, opening with Townes Van Zandt's *Dollar Bill Blues* doesn't hurt them with FAR or 3CM, but after that they're on their own with originals, mainly by Stuart but also banjo whiz Janet Beazley and now departed resonator guitar master Ivan Rosenberg. How this will go down in Bluegrass, or, come to that, Americana, circles is not for me to say, but for some outstanding songs, notably Stuart's marvellous title track and his *very* Townes-ish, and excellent, *Rider On This Train*, fabulous picking and a whole mess of soul, check this out. If you're in the music biz, check out the sensational packaging—this is the kind of album that gets taken seriously by writers and DJs just because it *looks* so good you figure it must be good, and, in this case at least, looks are not deceiving. **JC**

## IRIS DeMENT • LIFELINE

(Flariella \*\*\*\*.5)

Major conflict here; on the one hand I'm currently in no mood for an album of Protestant hymns, on the other, it's good to have a new Iris DeMent album, even if it is of Protestant hymns. When I first saw her, in 1992, her booker, Cash Edwards, was twisting arms to get people to come to ad hoc Austin gigs, but about a week later Warner bought up her Philo debut and she was a star, or at least a country-folk star (immediately dumping Edwards, which I thought was rather shitty of her). After a couple more Warner albums, DeMent didn't exactly disappear, a determined fan could have amassed a fair number of 'special guest' albums on which she sang one song or harmonies, but she hasn't put out an album in eight years, and, obviously, the Warner deal is history. Equally obvious is that she hasn't yet overcome the writer's block about which she's been fairly open, only one of the 13 songs is original, the rest, as she says in the liner notes, are "the first songs I heard and the first I sang" as the youngest of 14 children in a devout Pentecostal family, and though she broke with the church, "I sing them still. Especially when I hit hard times" Interestingly, the release date was Election Day, but while DeMent observes "These songs aren't about religion... They're about something bigger than that," the fact is that her personal lifeline consists of church music, and, for a shot of her fabulous voice, I, for one, will revert to *Infamous Angel* or her stunning *Big City on Tulare Dust* (come to think, 'DeMent Sings Haggard' would make a great album). **JC**

## LISA O'KANE • AM I TOO BLUE

(Raisin' Kane\*\*\*\*)

Couple of months ago, I was a bit equivocal about O'Kane's second album, *Peace Of Mind*—loved her, couldn't get along with most of the material. The extraordinarily gracious Ms O'Kane not only thanked me for this halfhearted endorsement, but sent me a copy of her 2001 debut, of which I'd only heard a couple of (very impressive) tracks because it was never promoted in the US. Hearing her versions of Lucinda Williams' title track and *Pineola*, Hank Williams' *My Sweet Love Ain't Around*, *Lovin' You Again* which Emmylou Harris cut on *Cowgirl's Prayer* (and I think was done by Tompall Glaser), KT Oslin's *Wall Of Tears*, John Prine's *All The Way With You*, Sandy Denny's *Like An Old Fashioned Waltz* and Bill Monroe's *Old Cross Is Waitin'*, you can see why she has a stack of raves in many languages and is quite the star in Europe. O'Kane is an object lesson in the difference between a cover and an interpretation. Her readings of these songs aren't 'better' or 'worse' than the originals, they have an otherness that allows them to stand alone. O'Kane has a truly wonderful voice and when she has this kind of material to work with, well, folk-country just doesn't get any better. **JC**

## JOHN VANDIVER • I FOUND A DREAM

(Jelly Roll \*\*\*\*.5)

Acoustic bluesman Vandiver was murdered in 1985 but some years later his name was still being invoked as a great guitarist and entertainer. Both can be judged from a live recording, recently unearthed and released by his daughter, made at Poor David's Pub, Dallas, in 1984, on which he plays 16 numbers ranging from Robert Johnson and Leadbelly to Dylan and Randy Newman, with a couple of originals. When I asked around people who might have known Vandiver, I got this from David Rodriguez, and I'll let him speak from firsthand knowledge: "My first impression of John was that of being incredibly jealous of his guitar playing. He had a beautiful mastery of ragtime and coupled it with blues songs to make a powerful solo show. Sort of like if Mance Lipscomb had gone to music conservatory but still stayed himself. I was dating the Girl With Three First Names who lived around the corner from Corky's, in the Montrose, and Shake Russell was the house band there. One day he asked me show him *Snow Leopard*, next thing I knew Vandiver was playing it too. In fact one night I saw him and Shake playing it in the Montrose bar where I wrote the thing. Then in the early 80s John & Shake released an LP called *Comin' Home*. It was beautiful and on it they do *Snow Leopard* as a duet. It's pretty much the way they did it live back then and it is still my favorite version of the song. If you ask me who my favorite guitar players are from Texas: Lightnin' Hopkins, Guy Clark (I leave Townes out because he and Guy play almost the same way and I don't really know who did what first), Stevie Ray, John Vandiver and Augustin Ramirez." **JC**

## HOPPED UP! • GET GONE LIL' BIT & THE CUSTOMATICS

### HEADIN' ON

## BETSY-DAWN WILLIAMS

### ROCKET GIRL

## TONY MASERATI • THE CAT

Most roots genres have the same problem, that their ideal format is singles rather than albums, but rockabilly adds a twist. Unlike, say, country or blues, it doesn't have a past, because true rockabilly fans know the music from Day One to the present. This puts enormous pressure on neophyte groups which must not only have 'the sound' down cold but, since a million compilations have made obscure songs very hard to find and cover, they have to come up with most of an album's worth of original material when legendary greats might have put out an album's worth of great singles in an entire career. This is why you rarely hear hosannas going up over a new rockabilly CD, but anything even halfway decent can expect a warm welcome. The youngsters of Santa Rosa's energetic Hopped Up! (Rhythm Bomb [Germany] \*\*\*\*.5) and San Antonio's softer-edged, more hillbilly Lil' Bit & The Customatics (Lil Bit O' Trouble \*\*\*\*.5) have a fairly similar approach, a couple of covers, Carl Perkins' *That Don't Move Me*, Dale Hawkins' *Little Pig* and Brenda Lee's *Bigelow 6-200* from the former, Blind Boy Fuller's *Step It Up & Go* and The Shelton Brothers' *Just Because* from the latter, with the rest of the songs written by various bandmembers. They also share the problem that their albums go flat when frontwomen Scotty Shanks-Bruemmer and Jen Adams give over the mic to a colleague, and while Customatics bassman Tomcat Miller shows distinct promise as a songwriter, their material is pretty generic. Boston's Betsy-Dawn Williams (El Toro [Spain] \*\*\*\*.5) has a background that includes playing frottoir in a Cajun band, string bass in a country swing band, electric guitar in a roots-rock band, and her 12 originals, plus Sun rockabilly Kenny Parchman's *Get It Off Your Mind*, are at least offbeat and distinctive, but she has an edge in that her backing is by seasoned rockabilly musicians, notably multi-instrumental monster Jeff Potter (piano, drums, guitars) of The Lustre Kings. Austinite Tony Maserati (Poverty \*\*\*\*) also has some killer backing, with not one but two great guitarists, *Dave Biller on 11 of the 19 tracks*, John Reed on six (both of them on four), turning in some magnificent work, and, as on his *Rock & Roll No 3* (reviewed June, 1998), Google has yet to write an algorithm that penetrates the depths of his record collection. There are no originals at all, but this is a great game of 'Stump the Audience.' *Girl Of My Best Friend*, easy, Ral Donner and Elvis, *Too Hot To Handle*, well Deke Dickerson does it, but so did Lattie Moore and Gene O'Quin, *Look Out Miss James*, OK, The Flairs, *Four Tired Car*, Rudy Preston, *All I Can Do is Cry*, Wayne Walker (and Martí Brom), *Tom The Boogie Woogie Tomcat* is a Sheb Wooley song, *Hot Rodder's Dream* is by Johnny Bond, after that, well even the Internet doesn't help much. **JC**

## KEN BURKE

### COUNTRY MUSIC CHANGED MY LIFE

(Chicago Review Press, hardback \*\*\*\*)

Subtitled 'Tales of Tough Times and Triumph from Country's Legends,' Burke's book does have the virtue of an original concept, even if his definition of 'Legend' is somewhat elastic (Freddy Weller?!). From the rather peevish tone of his intro, one gets the distinct impression that this would have had a very different cast of characters if he'd been able to get access and, bearing in mind that he openly admits to writing for *Country Standard Time*, one can't help wondering who stiff-armed him. All for the best though as, even if he obviously wanted Shania Twain's rags-to-riches story, he opens with Brenda Lee, who, at 13, was the sole support of the Tarpley family; if she didn't sing country music, her mother and siblings didn't eat. Works for me. Sticking firmly to the Outhouse Principle ('Never write anything longer than the average person can read during the average shit'), Burke's biggest problem is that, having spent their careers reciting Nashville scripts, few country stars have much experience in opening up in interviews. The contrast between team players like Bobby Bare ("all the people I've dealt with I love dearly") and those who don't, or no longer, give a shit, most notably Deke Dickerson ("[Rose Maddox] was the meanest woman you've ever met!") is very striking. Still, Burke does get some revealing and interesting stuff out of most of his subjects, and scores big with me for including Barbara Pittman, but while Linda Gail Lewis is very forthcoming about her brother, rather unexpectedly my favorite interview is with Pat Boone who had "no interest in country music at all" until 16-year old Shirley Foley, his future wife, transferred to his high school. "I had an *immediate* interest in country music! And I became a big Red Foley fan overnight." **JC**



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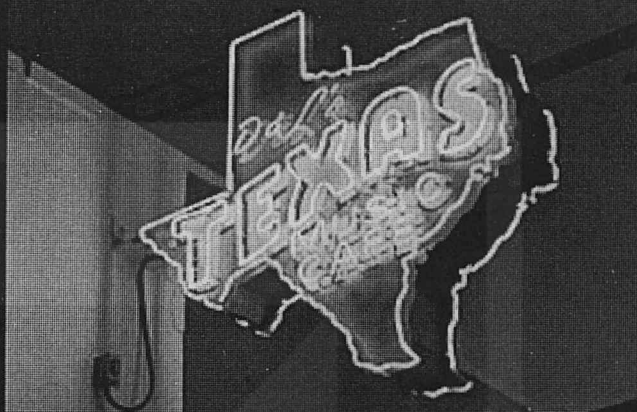
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## SIT THE F\*#K DOWN!!! CMA AWARDS ONE LONG, UNDESERVED STANDING O

I've been forced to pay close attention to the annual CMA Awards show for more years than I care to remember, and I have become convinced that everyone in attendance suffers from ADHD. Like a room full of whacked out seven year olds who have gone off their meds, these people simply can't stay seated. How else do you explain an entire audience springing out of theater seats like their asses were on fire after a Kenny Chesney performance? They're hyper, I tell you!

Speaking of meds, after watching standing ovations for the likes of Chesney and Martina McBride, I was more than ready to swallow a bottle of pills. Such is my life on CMA Awards night. For those of you who didn't watch or were too drunk to remember anything, here's what you missed:

**Toby Keith** No matter how big of a year this guy has, Nashville shoots him down on CMA night. Keith got beat out by Chesney in the Entertainer and Album categories, even though it could be argued that he'd had a much more successful year, but Keith's lyrical bluster and bullshit, combined with his Oklahoma address, alienates plenty of Nashville voters. Perhaps my favorite moment of CMA night came during the duet between Keith and his daughter Crystal. They came out together and covered *Mockingbird*, complete with that country music staple...the sax solo. For the record, Crystal, whose booming voice is almost as impressive as her massive rack, blew daddy off the stage. At the end of the song three people—I'm assuming grandmothers and a wife—left their seats to try to urge the room into a standing ovation. It was the one time all evening that the crowd didn't bite. Take that Toby! One other reason to dislike Keith...his lead player sports a Les Paul and wears it up around his chest like some sort of fruity 'lite jazz' guitarist.

**Martina McBride** Strolling across the stage delivering her usual weepy ballad, Martina looked like a children's talent search contestant right down to the cheesy hand and head motions. The heart-tuggers that have become her stock and trade are the musical equivalent of movies like **Patch Adams**. They are both essentially just emotional fluff designed to evoke tears from stupid people.

**Bad Sets** McBride wandered across a dorky little bridge and among some fake trees during her performance. It reminded me a little of the Lawrence Welk show. Shania Twain and her duet partner sang on a set that was built to look like two rooms with each person singing a phone call to each other. It was pathetic.

**Reba McEntire** Hasn't anyone told her that huge amounts of blue eye shadow make women look like Dairy Queen waitresses in rural Minnesota?

**Lonestar** Hasn't anyone told these guys that jeans with rips strategically placed by your designer make you look like world class nancy boys?

**Faith Hill** We were thankfully spared the worry of this hack winning an award, as she wasn't nominated at all that evening, but there was something truly profane about seeing her sing *Help Me Make It Through The Night* during the Kris Kristofferson induction to the Country Music Hall of Fame.

**Tim McGraw** As the opener of the telecast, Mr. Faith Hill gave his usual underwhelming live performance. However, I read during the last month that Timmy boy has said that Bill Clinton should be elected president for life. McGraw also says he will run for Senate in Tennessee as a Democrat when he

## CHARLES EARLE's B-Sides

turns 50. As a result, I have decided to cut the man some slack.

**Alan Jackson** As I was watching him sing the gorgeous *Sunday Morning Church* with Patty Loveless, I found myself wondering how the alt.country crowd regards Jackson. If they dismiss him as being a part of Music Row's bland ways, they are making a huge mistake. I think Jackson will one day be remembered as one of country music's greats. One interesting note about the pre-show that took place on CMT: When he was told by the red carpet doofus/reporter that he had been named one of CMT's sexiest men in country music, Jackson winced with genuine embarrassment and didn't even want to acknowledge what was said. When told the same thing, Kenney Chesney mugged for the camera and guaranteed that he had come in ahead of Tim McGraw.

**Sara Evans** Her voice has been hit-or-miss at times on television, but I have to admit that I loved her performance this year. Call me a nerd if you want, but I think her *Suds In The Bucket* is the catchiest country song I've heard in a good while.

**Gretchen Wilson** The self-proclaimed redneck girl took home the Horizon Award as expected. Perhaps more importantly, she blew the room away with her ballad *When I Think About Cheating*. Her handlers picked this cut to show the television audience just how powerful her pipes truly are. She didn't disappoint. In a song drenched with heavenly pedal steel and honky tonk piano fills, Wilson's voice was the most impressive instrument on the stage.

**Terri Clark** Folks in Music City had in recent years been dismissing the idea of any large successes for Clark due to widespread rumors that she is a lesbian. That kind of thing just doesn't play too well in Nashvegas. So how funny is it that she is having a solid comeback and appeared on the CMA Awards with an all female band to perform a cut called *Girls Lie Too*. Nice job, Terri. And I personally don't care which team you bat for.

**Brooks & Dunn** They were just plain awful as emcees. On CMA night in my drunken state, I felt like the kid at the end of *Shane*, except I was saying "Come back Vince Gill, come back".

### FAKING IT: RECYCLED IN HONOR OF ASHLEY WOS'NAME

A handful of our country divas seem to be perfectly awful singers in live settings. They go on award shows and give dreadful performances of songs they seem to have nailed on their records. I've always known that you can do a few things to doctor up a voice in the studio, but the difference between what I was hearing live and on record recently was much more startling than in years past. I found myself wanting to know how it was that Faith Hill sounded like Edith Piaf on an album and Edith Bunker on stage.

A revolution in software has basically eliminated the need for vocal talent. The bottom line is that producers/engineers can use their keyboards and mice to 'fix' recordings, and by fix, I mean quite simply that they can make bad things sound good. People in the commercial country music industry know quite well about the digital manipulation that is possible with Pro Tools, which has become synonymous with this form of audio trickery, the way Kleenex is synonymous with facial tissue, but it seems doubtful that any of them care, based on the fact that most engineers tell me that the use of this software is standard practice in Music Row studios.

Manipulating a recording in some form or fashion is not a new thing. It's been done for years, though in seemingly more innocent fashions. Many years ago, engineers learned that they could cut and splice tape and come up with a recording that was pieced together from several different performances by an artist. Imperfections could be removed by taking the best parts from each, but as Grammy-

winning engineer Richard Dodd told me, what's done these days is very different, "[Back then] they'd simply chose a better performance over a lesser performance, not an inability over an ability."

Dodd said, "It's not at all out of the question that you could put a monotone in and come out with a melody." If a vocalist is short, Pro Tools can lengthen notes almost endlessly, if a vocalist is flat, it can fix that too. "I've spent many hours in the past working with people who have very little talent," Dodd said. "It's not a new thing to not have talent and to get to make a record, but now we can lie. Before I spent weeks with an artist trying to get a performance that's vaguely acceptable, now you spend as little time with them as possible, and then you put it into something like Pro Tools so you can create what you want it to be. The only thing the artist might bring to the table from a sonic point of view is that they might be able to produce a sound that is commercial or unique. And the fact that they can't phrase it or they can't pitch it isn't relevant anymore."

You're all free to speculate as to why such an ability to prop up inferior talent is important, but the bottom line is marketability. Gone is the scenario in which the A&R guy from the label has to ask about the gorgeous girl, "Can she sing?" She doesn't have to anymore. Stephen W Smith, a veteran live engineer, may have said it best: "Why drag a quirky, eccentric, hard-to-deal-with person who has real talent into the studio anymore? You can find so many attractive, marginally talented people who are ready to do whatever they are told." Dodd agrees with this line of reasoning. "The industry wants the look of a 14 or 16-year old with the performance of a 36-year old. So, you can either wait 20 years or you can cheat."

Years ago, when Tipper Gore was just an annoying do-gooder, there was much talk from her and her buddies about labeling records for their content. If Tipper and her fellow upstanding citizens were to have their way, saying the 'f' word on your album would result in a big, fat sticker on the front cover. Folks in the industry grouched about it being censorship, but they eventually caved in and now our records have warning labels. But wouldn't it be fun to see the industry's reaction if somebody proposed the following sticker:

### WARNING

The content of this album has been digitally manipulated with computer software in such a way that the vocalist's performance may not be a correct reflection of her/his natural ability.

Cell phones would fly out of a label president's ass before he would allow such a sticker on one of his albums, but Trisha Yearwood's manager told me, "I don't think people really care if they're being fooled," and, considering that Britney Spears' fake boobs aren't fooling anyone, she's probably right.

It is important to note, however, that Pro Tools and the other similar types of software are not evil by any stretch of the imagination. There are plenty of good ways to use these packages. They are tools, plain and simple. What Photoshop is to photographs on the computer, Pro Tools is to music, but as is the case with any technology, some will use it the wrong way, and just as you can find pictures on the Internet of Neve Campbell's head attached to another woman's naked body thanks to Photoshop, you will often find the right voice attached to the wrong vocalist thanks to Pro Tools. This is simply a fact of life now for all music fans. And yes, I am somewhat outraged by that thought. But there are plenty of people at record labels who are paid to not give a shit what I think.

**JC:** since Charles wrote this piece, there have been major advances in pitch correction technology for live performances. Every performer at a Shania Twain concert, for instance, is now run through pitch correctors, so her audience will be spared the horror of ever hearing a bum note. Hallelujah!



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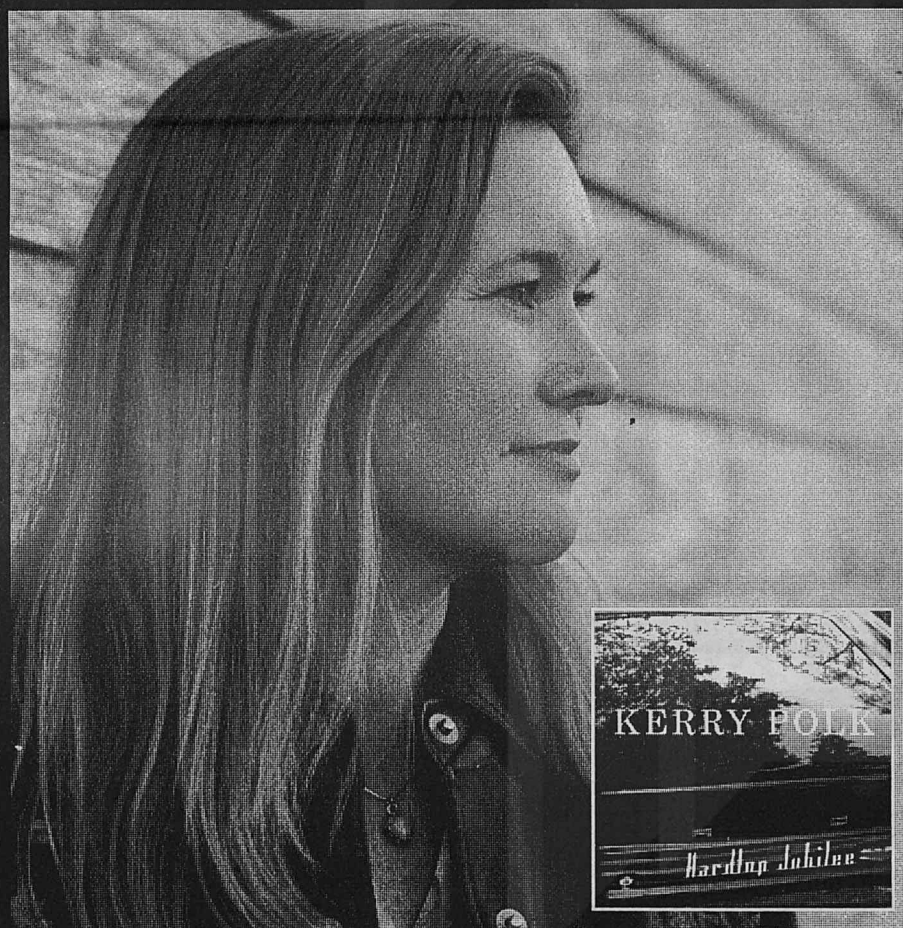
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# JOHN THE REVEALATOR

Only a typo, but rather unfortunate. A line in **David Rodriguez's** *The Third World* goes "Mr Rodriguez, will you help me spell your name?" but while I got 'Rodriguez' right, in fact three times, on the cover of the November issue, I managed to screw up the easy bit, so now he can sing "Mr Davd, will you help me spell your name?"

♦ Normally, I don't accept any responsibility for other people's ignorance or inability to parse a complex sentence, however, last month, I may have assumed something to be common knowledge when perhaps it isn't. While I could equally have said of a singer I thought was too tightly wrapped on some songs that she might ought to have smoked some dope, had a couple of drinks or done some Yoga exercises, I opted to recommend a **beta blocker**, figuring most people know they're routinely prescribed for and/or used by musicians to relieve performance anxiety. Apparently they inhibit the primitive fight or flight reflex and many musicians simply couldn't function in front of large audiences without them, according to one survey, about 25% of symphony orchestra players use them. However, though there's been a good deal of media coverage about beta blockers, it seems they're still something of a musicians' secret, in fact even a secret to some musicians. So now you know. Also, some people managed to read the review as saying that she *had* taken beta blockers when the point I was trying to make was that she *hadn't*, but might ought to have, and I apologize if this was ambiguous.

♦ It occurs to me that I haven't heard any really good musician jokes in quite a while, in fact, looking at a roundup I did way back in the March 1992 issue, nothing much is coming to mind. However, one that can sure go into the next **3CM Official Joke Book** came from **Johnny Bush** at a Casbeers gig last month: This drummer was always dragging but he really needed the job so they cut him some slack even though he was driving the other guys nuts, but eventually the bandleader had to let him go. The drummer was so despondent about losing the gig that he went down to the railroad station and threw himself behind a train.

♦ Bush was playing an acoustic gig with **Levi Mullen**, which segues us into a bit of fun I had when **Amber Digby** was my guest on *Third Coast Music Network* last month. Of course, I played a bunch of tracks from her album, **Music From The Honky Tonks**, but also tracks from their own CDs by Mullen, who played guitar on it, **Bobby Flores** who played great skip-skip fiddle on it, **Justin Treviño**, who produced it and played bass and rhythm guitar on it, and **Dickie Overbey**, Amber's stepfather, who played steel guitar (and wrote a couple of the songs) on it. Then, for good measure, I put on *There She Goes*, written and recorded by Amber's distributor, **Durwood Haddock**, of Honky Tonkin'. If **Debra Hurd**, who played piano, had a CD, we'd have had a full house of albums by everybody involved in Amber's. Whoops, and the drummer, John Reynolds.

♦ Amber's big news is that **Loretta Lynn**, who's cut many songs by **Lola Jean Dillon** (*Somebody Somewhere, You're The Reason Our Kids Are Ugly, When The Tingle Becomes A Chill, Bring Some Of It Home, Somebody Led Me Away*), has bought Dillon's entire catalog and wants Amber to record demos of it for her. However, the news I've waiting for, and have been doing my bit to make happen, is the reissue of **Music From The Honky Tonks** (with a complete visual makeover) by Bobby Flores' Yellow Rose Records, which will happen very soon, possibly before Christmas. This will make it a whole lot easier to find, and if I could afford to buy you all a copy, I would in a heartbeat.

♦ As a footnote to the cover story, RCA recently signed, after what I hear was a fierce major label bidding war, Maine singer-songwriter **Ray Lamontagne**, and while buying a new house with your advance may not be anything new,

Lamontagne's reason is a little unusual. He and his wife live way back in the woods and she can't handle cutting and hauling all the wood it'll take to keep their place warm while he's off touring this winter, so they had find a place with more modern heating.

♦ In *Country Music Changed My Life* (see Reviews), **Ken Burke** has quite a few good stories, of which my favorite is **Deke Dickerson's** account of playing a pickup band gig with **Hank Thompson**: "[He] pulled out this ornately engraved Gibson Super-400 leather case from his trunk; it had his name engraved on it and all this fancy Western stuff. Then, he pulled out this guitar. It's a Super-400, top-of-the-line, best arch-top electric they ever made. It has this hand inlaid armrest, his name on the neck, gold hardware and everything. This guitar is probably worth at least ten thousand dollars. Then Thompson pulls out a Radio Shack, four-foot long, molded-end guitar cord. He plugs the electric in and plugs into the Standell, walks to the mic and discovered it's not long enough. So I have to move the Standell, which is really heavy, forward enough so his guitar cord will reach. I was thinking, 'God damn man, this is like the living epitome of Hillbilly Flash. He spends ten thousand dollars on his guitar and a dollar ninety nine on the cord.'" The odd thing about this is that Thompson originally intended to be an electrical engineer, which makes you wonder what they actually teach people at Princeton and SMU, where he studied.

♦ I read where **Liza Minnelli's** bodyguard claims she forced him to have sex with her. Still, it could have been worse, she might have forced him to listen to her music.

♦ A participant in an online forum to which I subscribe has access, though a record label friend, to **Soundscan** sales figures and recently posted those, as of 11/14, for a few Americana albums and they make pretty dismal reading. **Drive By Truckers** were the front runners of the batch, with 32,000 copies of **Dirty South** (New West). Even on a major label, **Kasey Chambers** only clocked 22,000 copies of **Wayward Angel** (EMI), but that put her well clear of *No Depression* favorite **Buddy Miller**, whose **Universal House Of Prayer** (New West) registered 8,000. Rather oddly, **Eleven Hundred Springs** apparently sold 1,100 copies of **Bandwagon** (Palo Duro), maybe they should have called themselves Eleven Million Springs, or even Eleven Thousand Springs.

♦ Did you hear about the terrorist plot to hijack last month's Country Music Association Awards show? Their plan was to threaten to release one hostage every hour until their demands were met.

## LOOSE DIAMONDS A DJ's PRIVATE STASH #10 DAVID OBERMANN

Personally, I think **3CM** has racked up quite a lot of 'scoops,' Amber Digby for instance, but perhaps the only time I beat every other paper in Austin to a real daily/weekly journalist type story was when I announced David Obermann's move to London, where he'd been transferred by his day job employers, in a cover feature (*Music City Texas* #74, October, 1995). The editor of the *Austin Chronicle* acknowledged that this was the first he'd heard of it, the point being that he too thought it was a very big deal.

While, naming no names, other local stations and other DJs diligently promote themselves, Obermann has long been a quiet giant of Austin radio, as one of the hosts of KUT's *Folkways*, which now runs 10am to 4pm on Saturdays, from 1981 to 1995 and again from 2000, when he was sent home again. For many people in Austin, that time slot has long been reserved for a show that, at least when Obermann is at the wheel, has a truly catholic definition of folk music. There are, I'm pretty sure, few folk DJs who can claim they had Ronnie Dawson

as a studio guest. Of course, there probably aren't many who'd want to, but David Obermann is my kind of folk DJ. **JC**

Caveats: I'm not a writer, nor all that knowledgeable about these artists, but I'm very passionate about what they created. There are no releases more recent than 2002, to apply some test of time. Each of them is at least 3 flowers on the Conquest scale (where I'm the judge, of course). And this list is totally capricious, which is to say that if next week I made another, it would be entirely different. That is why I keep doing radio...so much music, so little time.

**Tim O'Brien & Darrell Scott: Real Time** (Howdy Skies, 2000) For all I know, this is already on everyone's desert island list. If not, it should be. Tim has long occupied the top shelf of my musical tastes, while Darrell is a recent add (my fault, not his). Together, they are magic...as writers and musicians. A benchmark recording on many levels. **Mark O'Connor's Hot Swing Trio: Hot Swing!** (OMAC, 2001) If you demand vocals, this is not your disc. If you want to hear the perfection of a live recording, it is. As a bonus, you'll experience a defining musical event. Yes, they play jazz, esp. Django and Grappelli, but these three virtuosos are so muscular they transcend mere reverence to honor their mentors with verve, sweat, and their own signatures. Rapture!

**David Norris: Southern Son** (self, 2001) David bills himself as 'Tunesmyth,' which I took as a pretty bold bait, and ended up swallowing hook, line and sinker. There are 12 tracks here, and each of them is a keeper. OK, he's got some fine help here from the likes of Gary Ferguson, Jim Hurst and Missy Raines, which creates a tasteful bluegrassy ambience, but it's David's wordplay that keeps me coming back spin after spin.

**Uncle Bonzai: A Lonely Grain Of Corn** (Freckle, 1984) Powered by Andrew Ratshin's songs, music and guitar (gifts which later sustained him as the solo act Electric Bonzai Band), it's the vocal magic of Arni Adler and Ashley Eichrodt mixed with Andrew's high falsetto that keep me coming back spin after spin. It doesn't hurt that the songs spew an urban hipness, wit, and energy that's contagious. Pity they are no more.

**Caroline Aiken: Unshaken** (self, 2002) A favorite of the Kerrville crowd, here's a songwriter/guitar slayer who dares to rock, and better yet, pulls it off. Sure, there are the well-worn themes of love, anger, recovery, etc. Caroline energizes them fresh settings and stories, mixes in new challenges such as rape and 9/11, and keeps you on-edge with hot guitar licks and instrumentals. A real-life genetic combo of Joni Mitchell/Patty Larkin.

**Bob & Wendy: Behind The Blue** (self, 2001) If I ever get to California, I'm definitely gonna look up the Liepmans. Wendy provides the songs, guitar, and vocals (and what a voice she wields - delicate, soaring, at times playful, always melancholy), yet one could not imagine this duo without Bob's rhythm section of cello and mandocello. Together, they create a unique and rewarding siren song...a mix of country, folk and strings which I can't escape.

**Red Allen & The Kentuckians: Bluegrass Country** (County, 1966) My nominee for the coolest album title ever, these pickers live up to their billing. They mine gems from the catalogs of Bill Monroe, Jimmie Martin, Jim & Jesse, the Stanley Bros, and Lester & Earl, then up the lode with bluegrass updates of country standards, paying dues to the likes of Johnny & Jack, the Louvin Bros and Kitty Wells. Produced and liner notes by (a young) David Grisman.

...and in the holiday spirit...

**Lisa Neustadt & The Angel Band: Shout For Joy** (Philo, 1986) Yes, this is a folky Christmas album, with many hum-along favorites, plus some nice obscure treats. What sets this album apart from so many forgettable holiday recordings are the mesmerizing sacred-harp hymns and the knockout rendering of *The Holly Bears A Berry* featuring Jean Redpath in stunning form. Timeless. The soundtrack to my holidays, year after year.



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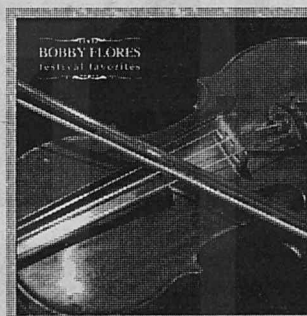
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## 1000 BADLY CHOSEN WORDS

Not so long ago, I mentioned being on a Texas Music Coalition panel and telling some horrified musicians that I could pretty much deduce from the publicity picture that came with it whether a CD was worth a shit. Admittedly, I'd given myself the rôle of fucking with their heads but I'd like if I may, and I think I may, to poke around this idea a bit. I was going to run this in October, tying in with Tim Lapping's *Los Musicos* photo exhibition, but got sidetracked, so now it doesn't relate to anything.

The thing of it is, a publicity picture is so much more than a 'snap.' With my philosophy seminars a distant memory, I'm not about to try and explain Semiotics in this space, but very crudely, and I hope there are no real semiologists reading this, such a pic contains not just the act (the 'signified') but any number of visual cues ('signifiers') that together make up a 'sign' to be decoded by the viewer. Pictures of musicians or bands in their day job outfits would tell you nothing, but publicity shots are staged to provide clues about their music, attitudes, stage personae and influences, to position them and to convey a message, 'We are cool,' 'We are badass,' 'We're really out there,' 'Admit it, you want to fuck me.' In short the picture says, 'This is who we are.'

Some signifiers are all too easy to construe, for instance, a Stetson unambiguously says 'Country musician,' why would anyone else wear one? However, when you pick up on other 'index' elements and symbols in the picture, say hero shirt, starched jeans, big belt buckle, shiny cowboy boots, fancy guitar and body language, they can add up to a quite specific reading of the artist's music, or anyway how he or she wants to be perceived, which is just as good, if not better,

Of course, you don't need no college degree to deconstruct such a picture, in fact the advertising industry relies on the fact that most people can do it instinctively, but while heavy metal has always shown a keen grasp of the value of signifiers and deploys them lavishly, many musicians send out pictures that, to me, simply say 'dork,' 'Texas Music wanker,' 'clueless,' 'all hat, no cattle,' 'legend in my own mind,' 'acoustic jewelry' and most common of all, 'couldn't afford/didn't see the need for a decent picture,' actually a category for which I feel a certain perverse affection. What I'm looking for, of course, is suggestions of 'intelligent,' 'serious,' 'can actually play this thing,' 'respect tradition,' 'have a personality,' stuff like that.

If someone looks like a deluded dork in a carefully posed picture, it's perfectly reasonable to assume it's because he or she actually is a deluded dork. One essential aspect of photography is that it's selective. Photographers discard reels of film for every acceptable shot, and the customer gets to pick from stacks of contact sheets, so what gets chosen is the one image, out of maybe hundreds, the subject thinks is the best, most persuasive calling card, and if it's dorky, well, maybe the camera doesn't lie. Trouble is, even if musos boned up on Barthes and Berger before their photo shoots, it wouldn't do them much good because Semiotics is all about individual and subjective interpretation, so a picture I think is pitiful might well end up on the cover of *Country Standard Time*.

Few people get to see these pictures in their 8x11 glossy perfection and by the time those that are usable, and far too many aren't but that's another issue, have been cropped, shrunk, reshot and put on newsprint, an awful lot of agonizing has gone to waste. Still, while I often use publicity shots, I always prefer live in action snaps, especially those by such often inspired amateurs as Bob Zink, Randy Dees and Tim Lapping. Of course, their subjects are usually people of whom I already approve, so I don't have to decipher them, just appreciate them as cool pix of cool musicians.

JC

## GREETINGS FROM AREA CODE 207 VOLUME 5

(Cornmeal \*\*\*\*\*)

Fewer people live in the entire state of Maine than in the Greater Austin metro area, but while it would be easy enough to put out 'Greetings From Area Code 512' compilations, hell, you could put out 'Greetings From Zip Code 78704' compilations, the fact is nobody does. Up in Portland, one tenth the size of Austin proper, compiler Charlie Gaylord is now up to Volume 5 of *Greetings From Area Code 207*, once again with a bonus CD of live on air recordings by visiting acts, including The BoDeans and The Cowboy Junkies, and while there's been some overlap, the overall picture is that, size for weight, there's an extraordinarily flourishing music scene up there.

Obviously, something's going on behind what Sean Mencher calls 'The Pine Tree Curtain,' and while local experts agree that there's a constant seepage of people who, wanting to 'make it' in the music business, move away, to Boston, New York, Nashville, LA or Austin (home to Mainers like Slaid Cleaves, Patty Griffin and Nick Curran), the local scene continues to thrive, and Gaylord can always find worthy artists to include on the next *GFAC207*. Mencher theorizes that, like a Lubbock on ice, "there's nothing else to do" but make music, "Maine's like the flip side of Texas, cold/hot, French/Spanish, blue/red." This idea gained credence when I discovered that both Gaylord and Sam Pfeifle, editor of the weekly *Portland Phoenix*, are also in bands, but Pfeifle tells me, "Everybody up here does about forty things, and works a full-time job, and then goes out and plays music."

What emerges in responses from the really rather amazing number of contacts I have in Maine is that Portland, at least, is a very supportive environment, not officially (what else is new?), but the city may have the only commercial station in the entire country that actively promotes local music. WLCZ not only sponsors the *Greetings* series, of which 100% of the proceeds go to benefit the St Lawrence Arts & Community Center, but airs a program, hosted by Gaylord, that's entirely devoted to local music. Then there's the community station, WMPG, which fields two FAR reporters, Chris Darling (*Us Folk*) and Tom Flynn (*Saltwater Farm*). Flynn says, "Musicians in this town are a community of artists, not competitors," and when I asked Pfeifle, universally acknowledged as a driving force in the Portland music scene, who buys all those CDs in the *Phoenix's* weekly list of Top 10 local CD sales, which itself helps stimulate sales and turnouts, he said, "Mostly other musicians," which reminds me of the Mark Twain line about people earning a precarious living taking in each other's washing.

When the first *GFAC207* came out, I commented on how pretty the girls sing Down East—Gaylord could easily put out a 'Greetings From The Women Of Area Code 207'—among them the wonderful Boo Cowie, appalling misused by the dysfunctional and now thankfully defunct Piners, and Darien Brahms, but the first name on the lips of everyone I know up there is always that of Sara Cox, who has the distinction of being the only artist featured on all five volumes of the *Greetings*. The second name is usually The Coming Grass, despite it's name an alt-country outfit, in which she's the main vocalist. It's hard to say whether Cox, who some of you may have seen in 3CM's NotSXSW Songwriter Showcase last March, is a better singer, voted Portland's Best Female Vocalist in the *Phoenix's* 2003 readers poll, or songwriter. Either way, Pfeifle made her *Arrive* (reviewed 3CM #81/170) his #1 Local CD for 2003. The recent success of Ray Lamontagne, who doesn't even live in Portland but way back in the boonies, gives one hope that her exceptional (anywhere) talents will be recognized without her having to make one of those sad career moves.

Though Area Code 207 covers the whole state, Maine is a fair size and I came to find that folks in Portland don't know much about what's happening 160 miles away in Bar Harbor, where Lee & Dee Haynes' *Austin-Acadia Connection* has been bringing Texas acts, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock (twice), Terry Allen, Jo Carol Pierce ("we had some bluehaired walkouts"), Ray Wylie Hubbard, Albert & Gage (four times), Sheri Frushay, Edge City, Mandy Mercier, Sisters Morales, Ruthie Foster and Eliza Gilkyson, since they fell in love with Texas music in the mid-90s. Even Boston's Sarah Borges had a Texas connection, Lee & Dee booked her pretty much as she stepped off the stage at a 3CM NotSXSW women's showcase last March. "One thing we have been very rigid about is not putting on anyone unless we have seen them first live—which is why the Austin trips have been such fun and such a good education."

If you wonder how they make this work, not just up in the far northeast corner of America but in a town of some 2000 people, after a trip to Portland to see Joe Ely, "We did some math about the number of folks in the audience, the number on stage and what we paid to get in and decided that touring couldn't pay too well and that maybe we could put on shows if we made it financially and socially attractive enough for the artists. We put together a mission statement with plans to let the artists have a working vacation, give them the use of the house and a car and all that, put packets out to some managers and soon we were off and running. People come from long distances to see stuff, smaller clubs are vanishing, so with us putting on these talents in venues of 140-220 seating capacity, makes for evenings that aren't readily available elsewhere—it's not unusual for folks to drive three hours each way."

I was thinking of trying to put together a mini-guide to Maine music, but a) I had too much information and b) my sources didn't agree on much. So, if you're pondering a trip there next summer, check out the *Greetings* series, and log on to the *Portland Phoenix* website to see what the locals like.

JC





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