

...the new releases

The keyboards and drums stick out for me in this song, the drums being so powerful and rocky. Again, the guitar playing is brilliant. There is not one fault I can find.

The vocals in *Running On Empty* are superb. Lyrically, this is so far the best song for me. The group of guitars strumming together works so well with Aynsley's voice. Steve Darrell Smith offers backing vocals, which are really great, and I would like to hear more of Darrell vocally as it sounds as though he has great potential. *Superficial* brings to the light how 'we're all the same beneath' yet we treat each other cruelly. I like the music produced from the keyboard as it gives the song that little bit of sadness and beauty. The electric guitar is really superb. Aynsley really does have a great vocal technique, which is heard in this song. It sounds so effortless and perfect.

Early Morning Dew wasn't a particular favourite of mine. The playing and singing is good, I just felt a little bored.

Running Out On Me picks up from the last song. This song is definitely a rocky blues song, which just oozes out sex appeal. *Sugar Low* is similar, with the fast pace and brilliant instrument playing. *Hurricane*, despite being the last track, has not lost any of its brilliance. It's hard to be critical about this album as there is very little to criticise. I would probably say to Aynsley to stick to the rocky songs, as the slow, ballads lose me. *Soul* and *Running Out On Me* are my two personal favourites, I recommend this album to everyone. **CB**
www.aynsleylister.co.uk

Bill Smarme and the Bizness THE MAN WITH LUCKY LIPS Self-released



★★★

An album which will surely make you laugh, but will wear thin after the second time

The level of enjoyment one is likely to derive from this album will depend largely on their sense of the ridiculous and the limit to which they are prepared to endure the parodying of many familiar old songs. Bill Smarme, who sings lead as well as playing guitar and harmonica, delivers his vocals in a pronounced west country accent. His band, the Bizness, comprises one-drum, who, apart from keeping a steady rhythm on the skins is also a reasonably proficient banjoist who also contributes bursts of the organ and occasional vocals, Micky Tenfingers, who also vocalises as well as offering guitar, mandolin, Dobro and kazoo, and Cactus Suzie, another kazooist, vocalist and double bass player. But, don't be fooled into thinking that this is some second rate group of wannabe musicians, they are all capable musicians.

Smarme has selected a dozen songs and he, with help from the Bizness, has altered the original arrangements and lyrics turning them into, if not hilarious, then certainly amusing parodies. They open with the Leiber/Stoller number *Lucky Lips*, a top five hit for Cliff Richard back in 1963. Twerton is a township on the outskirts of Bath and it features in a couple of numbers, notably a rehashed version of Ry Cooder's *That's The Way The Girls Are In Texas*, where Texas is substituted with Twerton and again on *Twerton Star*, a localised rendition of Lee Marvin's unlikely number one hit, *Wand'rin' Star* almost 40 years ago.

Cher's plaintive ballad, *Bang, Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)* is still called *Bang Bang*, but Smarme's version recounts a duel between himself and a local ice cream vendor over a fickle woman and involves the duellists resorting to an ice cream cone and a chocolate Magnum! Readers should have got the general drift as to what they can expect from other numbers like the Rogers and Hammerstein classic, *Favourite Things*, where it is unlikely that among Julie Andrews' favourite things would be greasy hot dogs smothered in mustard and jam roly-poly doused with lashings of custard. Georgie Fame's *Yeah Yeah* is, lyrically, altered beyond recognition and Sarah Vaughan would no doubt be bemused by the manner in which *Whatever Lola Wants*. Has been treated. In Smarme's hands, nothing is sacred, not even Dan Hicks' *I Don't Want Love*, Onie Wheeler's *Let's Invite Them Over* or Otis Blackwell's much recorded *Fever*.

Alright, listen to the album once and grin, twice and it wears a little thin, but Smarme and his cohorts are on something of a winner. I can see them causing great merriment between the bingo and pie and peas in many Working Men's clubs up and down the country as well as being well received in clubs on the British country music circuit. They have been booked to appear at a number of festivals, most notably, Glastonbury, in 2007. As a live act I am sure that Bill Smarme and the Bizness will rarely find themselves out of work because there is always going to be room for a little irreverence on the music circuit. **LK**
www.billsmarme.com

Bonnie Prince Billy BEWARE Domino



★★★

The cult hero's cult hero comes over all accessible with his latest set of country frolics

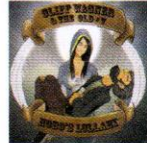
Whether recording under his own name or one of his multiple pseudonyms Will Oldham has always been very careful to preserve his myth, playing the game by not playing it and maintaining as much opaqueness (particularly lyrically) as possible. The type of artist for whom the term 'cult hero' could have been invented, his rag-tag bag of vaguely Americana-ish, vaguely folkish music has inspired fanatical devotion from those who love him and general 'uh?' indifference from those who don't. His new album however could be about to change all that.

Musically, it's one of his most accessible works, though lyrically it remains largely as obscure as ever. There's a distinctly churchy feel to many of the songs, which have big productions the opposite of his generally diy ethic, hymnal choirs on backing vocals, a vocal delivery from Oldham that's painfully honest and emotionally wracked and a kitchen sinks worth of instruments. He still has a playful side though, referencing 1960s girl groups on the chorus of *I Won't Ask Again* and reserving his bounciest, most tap-along tune for the doom that is *I Am Goodbye*. There's plenty of music that could come from the most country of his roots too, pedal steels and picking and sweetly sawing fiddles. As for those lyrics, the titles split fairly evenly into darkness (*Death Final*) and light (*I Don't Belong To Anyone*), the latter perhaps

as close as he's come to a personal mission statement. Regardless of that, however, it's the choruses that will stick in most people's memories: big, hooky, passionate and above all irresistible.

Oldham has pulled off a neat trick here: making a record that will appeal to the more mainstream of country/folk fans while retaining the things that endear him to those who relish the obscure. More importantly, he's made one of his best records. **JS**
www.dominorecordco.com

Cliff Wagner & the Old #7 HOBOS' LULLABY Wagco Records 002



★★★

Bluegrass with drums that works—but perhaps not for die-hard traditionalists

Apart from a GREATEST HITS release, Mississippi raised Cliff Wagner, who started playing his grandmother's banjo-uke at the age of seven before taking up the five string banjo and guitar by the time he was eleven, has two earlier albums, *MY NATIVE LAND* and *TAKE ME BACK TO THE DELTA* to his credit. A fine low tenor, banjoist and fiddle player, Wagner's band, the Old #7, is made up of Devitt Feeley, mandolin, Craig Ferguson, acoustic and resonator guitar, Lucas Cheadle, bass and Steve Mugalian, drums. Basically, Wagner and the Old #7 is a bluegrass band, but that needs qualification. The inclusion of drums, and it must be conceded that they do play a significant part throughout, will almost certainly alienate hard-core traditionalists. Perhaps even more 'liberal' bluegrass fans may display furrowed brows when listening to the opening track, a Wagner original, *Shake It Up* which, played on different instruments, might well be classed as bordering on rockabilly.

Elton John's *Honky Cat* has something of a bouncy jug band feel to it, not vastly dissimilar to the sounds of the wonderful Lovin' Spoonful from four decades ago. Dylan's *Don't Think Twice*, banjo dominated, goes through the motions, but, in truth, it lacks soul. The spirit of authentic Delta Blues is, however, extremely well captured in Muddy Waters' *Rollin' And Tumblin'* although quite how more serious bluegrass fans will react to the delivery is debatable and who would have envisaged that the Jerry Leiber/Mike Stoller pop hit, *Poison Ivy*, would translate quite comfortably into a bluegrass number? More in the style that one might expect from a bluegrass band are more Wagner originals, the driving *Lil' White Chapel*, *Castleneck*, *What Part Of Heaven*, *Old Fire*, *Shaffertown Road II* and *Southbound Train*. Three numbers which held particular appeal for this reviewer were the slow, contemplative *Same Old Me*, another Wagner original, *Hobo's Lullaby*, written by Goebel Reeves and possibly the highlight of the entire album, and Billy Joel's *You May Be Right*, which worked well. The only instrumental track is the traditional *Carroll County Blues*, where each musician is given the opportunity to stand in the spotlight and demonstrate their individual skill.

Did I find the drums intrusive? Well, yes and no. If this outfit had wanted to present a more traditional bluegrass approach it could well have dispensed with Steve Mugalian and allowed Lucas Cheadle to maintain a steady pulse on bass but clearly, partly through

the choice of material and partly by design, Wagner and the band would appear to be reaching out for a wider audience. As experienced bluegrass musicians they must have been aware of the possibility of alienating a section of the bluegrass fraternity, but despite this, they have done things their own way. As much as I love bluegrass, both traditional and contemporary, I believe myself to be relatively unblinkered and consequently, drums or no drums, I enjoyed most of what Warner and his band had to offer. Perhaps those given to a greater measure of eclecticism may well feel the same. **LK**
www.oldnumber7.net

Corey Crowder GOLD AND THE SAND Tooth & Nail Records-TND12541



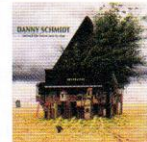
★★★★

Quality release from an outstanding young singer-songwriter

Raised in Georgia, Corey Crowder and his wife relocated to Nashville whereupon he became a contract writer with EMI—as well as being a touring and recording artist. His music has been getting a lot of plays through his MySpace page, with his early songs getting over five million listens.

This album is a great way to be introduced to Corey's music, with his breathy vocals taking you through the heartache of a broken relationship in *Leaving You* with mainly his own acoustic guitar giving perfect accompaniment, and he then carries the hurt on in the smoothly sincere *I've Become Something*. Russ Chapman's solid drum beat intrudes the steamy rocker *Innocence*, with Crowder's sexually charged vocals boosted by some rocking guitar solos and a fine brass section. *Devils* is a bouncy country/folk tune with banjo from Katlin Owen alongside Crowder's harmonica playing. This is a very good album from a young singer-songwriter worth taking a chance on. **DK**
www.coreycrowder.net

Danny Schmidt INSTEAD THE FOREST ROSE TO SING Red House Records



★★★★★

Compelling album of thoughtful and societal songs

Following a handful of self-released albums, and thoroughly justified success in the 2007 Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Songwriting Contest, Austin born and bred Danny Schmidt releases his debut disc for the Minnesota based Red House imprint. Recorded out on the southern tip of his hometown at Congress House studio, Schmidt and proprietor Mark Hallman share the production credit on this ten song collection—all Schmidt originals, although, oddly, the liner does not confirm such.

The lyrics are reproduced on the four-way fold-out card liner, which also features a couple of colour shots of Schmidt. A seasonal sign, he wears the same bobble hat in both, but his garments vary leading to the assumption different days, different locations—two photographers are certainly credited. Gracing the front of the liner is *The Piano* by Polish surreal landscape artist Jacek Yerka. In outline, a grand piano sits on a

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Buddy and Julie Miller WRITTEN IN CHALK New West

★★★★

Buddy Miller has been making exceptionally fine music with myriad acclaimed artists for many years. He has played various instruments, most notably guitar, with such luminaries as Steve Earle, Emmylou Harris and Lucinda Williams and last year he toured with the surprise hit duo Alison Krauss and Robert Plant. Buddy's wife Julie made a series of gospel albums in the 1990s as well as two for roots label High Tone, before they finally cut a record together in 2001. Now, eight years on, the pair have a second album out—and it really is a cause for celebration.

Ellis County sets the tone, with the Millers' gritty voices meshing on a delicious slice of old Americana which unfolds over a sparse fiddle and guitar backing. A throbbing bass line underpins *Gasoline And Matches*, a bluesy, sexually-charged opus that batters at your brain until you have to open your ears and let it in. But there are gentler moments too, like the atmospheric *Don't Say Goodbye* which features Julie's raw, emotional vocal and the stylish *A Long, Long Time* where the lady dazzles on a slow, jazzy burner enhanced by a muted trumpet solo. On the country-blues stomp *What You Gonna Do, Leroy?* Buddy shares the vocal spotlight with erstwhile Led Zeppelin titan Robert Plant as feisty fiddle and gutsy guitar add to the smoky sound. The title track, *Chalk*, finds Buddy delivering an angst-ridden ballad with able support from Patty Griffin and he revels in the soaring harmonies of Emmylou Harris on *The Selfishness Of Man*, which is given a beautiful country lilt by a weeping steel guitar. My lasting impression of the album is defined by the dark, unsettling saga of a mysterious femme fatale who gets under the skin. The song, accompanied by an edgy descending guitar riff, is entitled *Smooth* though, like the artists, it is anything but. Chalk up another splendid success for the marvellous Millers. **BK**

www.newwestrecords.com

sandy beach. However, where one would expect to see its supporting legs, up to keyboard level, a series of interconnected medieval style buildings surround/protrude from the instrument. As for manufacturer's logo, it's not Steinway or Baldwin, but a Yerka. That said, I have yet to crack the code of ten whole or partially eaten apples located immediately below—an enlarged version appears inside the card liner. The lid of the piano is propped open allowing a profusion of shrub greenery to explode from the main body. As you'll learn, the latter 'profusion' fits...like a glove.

I have to confess to being already familiar with two tenths of INSTEAD THE FOREST ROSE TO SING as, accompanied by the unsinkable Carrie Elkin, Schmidt included them in his four song set at the 2007 New Folk Songwriting Contest winners concert. Seated, Danny was accompanied throughout his set by then Boston, now Austin based Carrie Elkin. On the up-tempo *Serpentine Cycle Of Money* her vocal contribution was simply revelatory, thereby earning my accolade: 'woman who rocks in chair while singing'. Balancing only on the rear legs of her chair, Carrie simply sang her heart out. Elkin reprises that 'profuse' vocal approach here. Initially and cleverly referencing denominations of currency, Schmidt's focus subsequently moves to those in society who covet wealth and the detriment to others that results. The stirring and repeated chorus line: 'Give it back' neatly squares the circle.

A finger-picked blues, *Better Off Broke* opens this collection. As for the thrust of the song title/lyric, in these financially tense times, the proposition proffered could prove a means to forging mankind's future: 'You're better off broke with soup in your belly, Than sittin' there hungry round a pot of gold.' *Swing Me Down* amounts to a joyous dance—a Texas two-step?—across them there United States. Well, at least the decade Schmidt names checks, while the ensuing *Grampa Built Bridges* amounts to a poignant ancestral reflection upon the ages of man. *Southland Street* traces the rise and demise of motor manufacture in Motown—manufacturing in general, really—and the transfer to a location where '...the workers work for refried beans'. Schmidt brings this sad tale up to date with the appearance in the closing verse of '...the Indians and banking whores, Saying: 'Come on to the East!'

As a means of balancing the subjective sobriety of the latter cut, a deal of lyrical humour—and double entendre—pervaded *Swing Me Down* and the same can be said of *Two Timing Bank Robber's Lament*. *Firestorm* furnishes proof that art and commerce are uncomfortable bedfellows. His

performance complete, the musician is financially stitched by dishonest club owners. Having made the admission that, these days, he's now 'reformed and relaxed,' at the close of the opening verse the artist recalls how 'In the old days I'd have burned the bastards down.'

The Night's Beginning To Shine, a waltz for the days hours of darkness, brings gently to rest the musically gem encrusted INSTEAD THE FOREST ROSE TO SING. Financial avarice is a man-made ill that has no part in Schmidt's ethos, and that will become patently obvious to the listener while journeying through this collection. Did I mention that he was also responsible for the liner layout and design? Bottomless, what a talent! **AW**

www.redhouserecords.com

Stephanie Bettman GET CLOSE TO ME Self-released

★★★★

A varied and interesting country folk/bluegrass album possessing a wide range of textures

Creative fiddle playing vocalist/songwriter Stephanie Bettman not only draws on bluegrass and country, but strains of folk and jazz as she displays great flair. Warm and teasing she weaves an enchanting snare on *Man From Arkansas*, and the folksy *Get Close To Me (I Am Love)* with her vocals aided by her own masterful fiddle on the latter. The next minute with multi-picker Luke Halpin (mandolin), George Doering (guitar) and Peter Thomas (drums) it is all hands to the pump on *Separate Ways* as they all hit the road running—country fashion. *Evening Prayer* is a remarkably, energy building cut that produces some of the keenest picking. Possessing lots of fabulous mandolin, percussion, guitar and bass, Bettman jams it up like few others as she leads the ensemble with great imagination.

Produced by Richard Greene—a top ranking fiddler having played with Bill Monroe's Bluegrass Boys and was an ex-fellow member with Peter Rowan of Seatriain—he creates some solid and commendable sounds. Few come any finer or more exciting than *Seed Of Doubt*, a tune that has Bettman and Carl Verheyen (electric guitar) and Halpin plus a strong rhythm section stoke up the fire. With an occasional nod to Joan Baez, Bettman varies her style; *The Letting Go* momentarily possesses a Judds-like feel akin to *Mama He's Crazy* as middle-ground folk-pop filters through. While a more carefree feel is tendered on *Lulu Wants To Die* as Stephanie lets her hair down and boogies, with an electric lead guitar run reminiscent of Billy Swan.

If I was to critical, it would be to

suggest the Southern Californian Bettman should channel her mind more on making music possessing a greater country or bluegrass content, and to edge away from the folk-pop of *The Only Way To Love You*. Good though the sound may be. **MH**

www.stephaniebettman.com

Gaylynn Robinson LOVE & HEARTACHE Rufus Records RR002

★★★

An enjoyable listen from Gaylynn featuring a mixture of upbeat songs and songs of agonising heart ache

Producer and talented instrumentalist, Bobby Flores, has assembled a compact group of experienced musicians, Randy Reinhard who plays pedal steel and piano, Jake Hooker on the upright bass and drummer Jim Loessberg. Bobby Flores contributes guitar, fiddle, mandolin and string arrangements, in order to ensure that Ms Robinson receives the type of backing more favoured in Texas than it is perhaps in Nashville. As for Gaylynn, well, she is a Texan, has one previous album to her credit, and, in having written all ten songs on her latest album, proves herself to be a competent writer as well as a singer who tends to steer clear of the more pop oriented vocal styling currently in vogue with the majority of the young Nashville divas. By no means would I class Gaylynn as an instantly recognisable vocal stylist, but her phrasing and clear diction do make for enjoyable listening.

The real strength of her album lies in the backing she receives and from her well-constructed songs. These are varied in style and theme, opening with *Barn Rock*, an up-tempo boogie designed to get folk on to the dance floor. Although she resorts to a little growl now and then, perhaps a little more zip in her overall delivery would not have gone amiss. *A Girl's Night Out* is another number which picks up the tempo but she, and five other normal housewives are not out looking for a one night stand but are merely out on the town together to let their hair down, blow away a few cobwebs and generally have a bit of fun.

Aspects of love are the basis of a number of songs; *Concho To Colorado* and the lightly South of the Border flavoured *Keeper Of The Flame*, speaking of fidelity while *You Left Your Memories*, a nice swing number, and *Call Back My Heart Texas Moon*, complying with the best traditions of western swing, agonisingly tell of the pain of lost love. *Repeat Offender* chastises a wayward lover for his inability to remain faithful while *Poor Girl*, vaguely reminiscent,

melodically, to Bobbie Gentry's *Ode To Billy Joe*, is a very concise biography of an innocent young girl who ends up in the infamous 'House of the Rising Sun', demonstrating that Ms Robinson is as capable of composing a credible story song as the best of them. **LK**

inforgaylynrobinson@gvtc.com

Genticorum LA BIBOIRNOISE CAT RA102

★★★★

A blast of uplifting traditional music and songs from Québécois trio

What a joyous record this is. Whilst you sit back and admire the technical skills of this delightful trio, you just can't help breaking out into a smile. Formed in late 2000, Genticorum have now emerged as a serious force on the traditional Québécois music scene. The group is made up of Alexandre de Grosbois-Garand (wooden flute, electric bass, vocals), Pascal Gemme (fiddle, feet, vocals) and Yann Falquet (guitar, feet, vocals). The musical skills on display are awesome, with the opening set *La Grande Opossum* demonstrating intricate inter-play between the guitar and fiddle. If this wasn't enough to set up their musical credentials the next song *La Bibouirnoise* dispenses with the instruments altogether while the group sing an a cappella version of a strange little song about a prison made of food. Songs about naval battles and randy monks mingle quite happily alongside rousing instrumentals like *La Brandy Culotté* and more measured pieces like *Hommage à André Alain*. *J'y Vas Mon Train* is like a French version of the well-known *Singing the Travels* where the beauty of the simple life is praised above that of the rich. The standard never falters with the penultimate song about a cuckolded husband having a lucky turn of fate rippling along underpinned by Pascal Gemme's driving fiddle. The sound is reminiscent of the Dransfield brothers when they were at their peak. All through the playing is superb giving out a far rounder sound than could be expected from just the three of them. This is an album definitely worth investigating. **KM**

www.genticorum.com

Hank Woji AMERICAN DREAMS KZ Records KZR 003

★★★★

A powerful collection of protest songs written and sung by a man who clearly believes the American Dream needs to be saved