

For the best part of fifteen years Hank Woji played bass in a number of bands before deciding to front his own outfit. In 2001 he left New York and headed for Houston, Texas where he immersed himself in serious songwriting. He released his first album, *MEDALLION*, in 2005 but increasingly he came to believe that through the decisions made by corrupt politicians, avaricious bankers and *A Nation Rocked To Sleep*, the once great, ideological American Dream had, if not turned into a nightmare, dwindled to little more than a flickering ember. Incensed by all he saw happening around him he penned a number of songs highlighting the corruption, greed and injustices being perpetrated by those in high office or in positions where their behaviour often influenced the more impressionable, and, for the most part, these are the themes which are expounded most forcefully in *AMERICAN DREAMS*.

Although responsible for the composition of a dozen of the fifteen songs, Woji has chosen to open his programme with Ronnie Brandt's *Have You Thought About It*, a wake-up call to a nation which has allowed itself to be misled, imploring its people to open their eyes and take a long, hard look around them. That follows are a series of serious indictments aimed at those who are responsible for what Woji sees as the slow destruction of the once inspirational American Dream. There is his solo tirade against the scandalous waste of resources in *Because We Spent Our Money On A War*, his precise thumbnail portraits of some everyday people who have been beaten down by an unjust system which no longer even recognises their plight in *Living On The Edge*, further amplified by Brian Mullins' *Wounded, Homeless, Stranded, God Bless*. The callousness of an uncaring society is forcefully driven home with *Yuletide Blues*, followed by one of Woody Guthrie's masterpieces, *Deportee (Plane Wreck At Los Gatos)*. There can be no disguising the utter contempt Woji feels about money grubbing bankers in what might sound like a jolly little hoedown when he vents his spleen in *The Pigs At The Trough* while his rebellious streak manifests itself in the vitriolic *Patriot Games*, not dissimilar in sentiment to Dylan's bitter *Masters Of War* and certainly, had Woji written this during the early 1950s during the McCarthy witch-hunt, he would have been locked away for life. Celebrities who so often either wittingly or otherwise influence impressionable youngsters do not escape Woji's attention and they come in for a caustic blast from his pen in the cynical *Baby I'm A Superstar*. The same level of anger—and disappointment—is expressed in *A Nation Rocked To Sleep* on which Woji's vocals are backed by an acoustic guitar and mournful fiddle.

So, is the American Dream irrevocably dead and buried? Despite his anger, despair and disillusionment, Woji believes that there is still a glimmer of hope that it can be revived. He expresses his hope in *I Still Have A Dream*, *Love Is Real* and his supplication for some measure of salvation in *Saving Grace*, but the one song which offers real hope of a revival is *Strike The Match*, a rallying call on which he is joined by Glynace Eastham, Dodd Eastham, Ken Gaines and T.C.Smythe in a rousing finale which would have met the wholehearted endorsement of Guthrie, Seeger and others who, long ago spoke out against the very things which Woji opposes today.

In summary, a powerful collection of

protest songs which pull no punches, written and sung by a man who clearly believes that if the American Dream is to be saved, huge changes in the political and social landscape must take place and those who can bring about such changes are ordinary Americans who, for years have been lulled to sleep by the very people in whom they placed their trust. **LK**
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**Jeb Loy Nichols
PARISH BAR**
Compass 4497

★★★★☆
Classy laidback sounds from deepest Wales with interesting accompaniments

As befits a man with many non-musical strings to his bow, Jeb Loy Nichols brings a lot of influences, many of them unexpected, to his songs. Outside music he is a critically acclaimed artist and novelist and something of a green hero too. Inside music he's run with everyone from pioneering hip hop DJ Afrika Bambaataa to cult punks the Slits as well as taking in the more expected country and singer-songwriter sides of things.

On his latest album the underlying vibe is of an even more laidback JJ Cale, if such a thing can be imagined, but Nichols avoids too many soporific tendencies by throwing in some beats here, a few hints of reggae there and seasoning it with a little funk from time to time. His mellow croon lulls and flows like molasses to create a warm and gentle feeling that in the main matches his subject matter perfectly. Songs like *Days Are Mighty* and *Just A Country Boy* hymn the pleasures of the rural life and Nichols sounds as satisfied as it's possible to be.

If there's a problem here it's an occasional apparent lack of passion. Sometimes even when singing in the first person Nichols sounds like an observer rather than a participant, with his narrators at best only partially involved in their situations. On songs like the droll *Countrysmusicdisco45* this just about works, but on more personal pieces like *I Took A Memory To Lunch* it dissipates the song's power and makes it hard for the listener to be involved, let alone care. In general though *PARISH BAR*'s combination of superior writing and slightly left field accompaniment make it a much more worthwhile exercise than the hordes of more conventional one man and his guitar albums out there. **JS**
www.jebloynichols.co.uk

**Jeffrey Foucault
SHOOT THE MOON RIGHT BETWEEN THE EYES**
Signature Sounds Recordings

★★★★☆
Heartfelt tribute to folk-country singer-songwriter legend

According to a recent posting on Foucault's web site, when he was aged seventeen (around 1993), his father, Ken, brought home an album that was over two decades old. The front cover portrayed the performer sat on a hay bale. The aforementioned posting closes with the insight: 'It became my private religion for a while. I learned to play the guitar by learning his songs, and my Dad and I still play them around



the table after supper when I'm home.' If I tell you that the full title of this release is *Shoot The Moon Right Between The Eyes: Jeffrey Foucault Sings The Songs Of John Prine*, everything should now be clear. Prine was born and raised in Illinois, Foucault arrived on planet Earth one state to the left—Wisconsin—and close on three decades later.

Bar one, the thirteen songs that Jeff has chosen to cover are drawn from the first decade and a half of Prine's recording career. While *JOHN PRINE* was Foucault's introduction to the former mailman's music, it's selections from his sophomore opus *DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH* that bookend this collection. Supported by Eric Heywood's pedal steel and by Mrs Foucault (Kris Delmhorst) on the chorus, the lyrically impenetrable *The Late John Garfield Blues* opens this collection, and, from the same album, the poignant portrait of *Billy The Bum*, one of life's unfortunates follows. In the closing verse, with a deal of bitterness Prine chides: 'the folks in their holy cloaks,' none of whom, with an even hand, befriended this cripple hobo. 'For pity's a crime, And it ain't worth a dime, To a person who's really in need.' Hailing from Prine's self-titled debut, *Hello In There*, finds Loretta's unnamed/mature in years spouse reflect on family and their decades together. Written when Prine was in his early twenties, it's a spot-on portrait of the twilight years that is (most) everyone's lot in life: 'So if you're walking down the street sometime, And spot some hollow ancient eyes, Please don't just pass 'em by and stare, As if you didn't care, say, 'Hello in there, hello.' *One Red Rose*, from 1980's *STORM WINDOWS*, is a tender memory of first finding love, while the ensuing *Far From Me*, the second cut

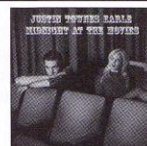
from Prine's debut, reflects upon love that is fading. Listed on the liner as track eight, it's actually the seventh on the disc.

A talented piece of wordplay, *Speed Of The Sound Of Loneliness*, follows. What unfolds is another reflection on how, over the years, the flame of love has a habit of diminishing. At the outset I noted how 'bar one' the songs were drawn from Prine's early career recordings. Co-written with Pat McLaughlin, the rock'n'roll paced, lyrically sly and subtle *Daddy's Little Pumpkin* is taken from 1991's *THE MISSING YEARS*. Listed as the closing cut, the good-time sounding *Clocks And Spoons*, from *DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH*, furnishes this tribute collection with its title.

Darn, just when you think you're done up pops *Souvenirs*—hidden within the body of the final track, some two and a half minutes of silence follow *Clocks And Spoons*. Co-written with the late Steve Goodman, Prine's friend and fellow Chicago based folk singer, the collaboration surfaced on *DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH* and—we pretty much end as we began—since, on this rendition, it appears that Jeff may have been accompanied by his father Ken—to whom he dedicates this recording. **AW**
www.signaturesounds.com

**Justin Townes Earle
MIDNIGHT AT THE MOVIES**
Bloodshot Records BS 160

★★★★☆
Justin strikes out as his own man on this eclectic second album



**Greg Copeland
DIANA AND JAMES**
Inside Recordings

★★★★☆
A return to the fray after 26 years with a stunning concept album...

This album gets down to business with *Muddy Water*, a shuffle beat propelled number. A young woman, dead, is pulled from the water but only minor facts regarding what, ultimately, remains a mystery are revealed: 'She had a twenty-year watch, around her wrist, little lariat cowboys, on her dancing dress.' The title track follows, wherein we meet, probably at a bad time, the male and female protagonists. Straight from the hip, James snaps: 'There's nobody else I want to be, Nobody else I can turn into, Honey baby, where have you been.' Greg Leisz's lap steel injects a country flavour into the ensuing *The Only Wicked Thing*, wherein, poetically, the narrator recalls how alcohol numbs his pain: 'For the memories of her and you, The milk of the madhouse, Say thank you to the man in the roadhouse.' In the waltz paced *I'll Find Someone*, still fuelled by the genie in the bottle: 'I've got my smoke and wine, And my Ballantines'—the male protagonist, sanguine but informed by experience, journeys on alone.

Melancholy laced with confusion and uncertainty pervades *Between Two Worlds*, while a moment of clarity ensues in the guilty confession *I Am The One*. Following the petition: 'Precious Lord, be my witness,' it's hard to discern whether regret pervades 'Do I love her, oh my goodness,' but Copeland subtly squares the circle with 'And bring your dress, the one with the cowboys.' The Biblical *Count The Bodies On My Crown* is followed by the traveller tale, *Blue Room, Red Suitcase*, which includes the entreaty: 'And don't fake nothing, Until you're gone.' Given our short time on Earth in *Who You Gonna Love*, frustrated, the narrator adds: 'Maybe we could find about 100,000 more years, And we could start to figure this out.'

On *Typical*, Leisz's pedal steel imbues Copeland's melody with a smoky bar-room feel. The focus of this collection is, subjectively, *A Woman & A Man*. The opening insight: 'There it is again, LA's buzzing like a busted amp' establishes the location, while the ensuing: 'And I think of you, Yes, I'm on the mend' and 'I've been dreaming and now I'm coming to' suggest partial recovery. As for: 'And the politicians, Are pissing in the wishing well,' they constitute a nod to the social commentary embraced in Copeland's 1980s songs. On the penultimate *Palace of Love*, violinist Carla Kihlstedt (Tin Hat etc.) shares the vocal with Greg, following which *All Those Things*, a delightful and lilting waltz, closes the album and finds the narrator concluding: 'I have seen enough, Of this long gaudy fall, Out of love.'

Copeland's album—coming a mere 26 years after his debut—is a diamond, proof positive that while his singing voice discloses wear, his skill with lyric and tune remain intact. Revenge can be timely and sweet. **AW**

