

died when you left'), the a cappella *The Loser's Prize*—same message, different song—complete with simple but affecting vocals from Sian Webley and the neo-traditional *Devil's Bridge*, where Robert Fisher of Willard Grant Conspiracy guests in surprisingly sprightly mode as he takes the part of the Devil. On the bad is *String Loop*, one of those pieces where everything electronic and non-electronic is thrown at the wall to see what sticks and unfortunately all of it does.

As for the rest, it falls firmly into the 'pleasant but ultimately not particular satisfying' category. On the self-consciously throwback *Red Rag Doll*, which bounces along with all manner of back porch noises going on only Webley's vocals attract. *Your Baby* is a homage to the classic *Is You Is Or Is You Ain't My Baby*, but suffers heavily in comparison and not even the sting in the tail aimed at fat cat bankers can make the light country of *Bumblebee* anything but disposable. Were *Survival* an EP it would be excellent, but it isn't, so the interested would be best advised to cherry pick from iTunes. **JS**
www.annakashfi.co.uk

Andy White
SONGWRITER
Floating World
Records

★
Belfast
songwriter's tenth
is as generic as
its title



This is the tenth release from Belfast native, now Melbourne-based White and one can read its title as a kind of ironic self deprecation, a throwing off of pretensions. But perhaps it would be more accurate to see SONGWRITER as a generic template to which White has adhered wholesale, a label stamped on the packaging of this disc, because the record proves a placid and uninteresting recital of all the worst archetypes of the singer-songwriter. There are big, universal statements that don't say a lot, there are plenty of unobtrusively strummed open chord progressions. Clichés are fumbled with, and it's all very earnest. At its best it's listenable, and at its worst it's insipid. Mr. Blunt seems a musical visionary by comparison.

SONGWRITER isn't awful. White is an able musician and his backup crew is drawn from the likes of Po' Girl, the Be Good Tanyas and Neko Case's band, all of whom demonstrate the competence you'd expect but never rise above the arrangements they're working with. The exquisite co-vocals of Po' Girl's Allison Russell are very welcome, and when she is placed in the foreground on *First and Discovery* it renders the song quite lovely. *Kathleen*, co-written by Russell, is another highlight with its nice zydeco flourishes. *Now it's Over* has a widescreen stadium appeal that is certainly catchy. These high points don't elevate SONGWRITER above what it essentially is: an album of filler material, outstaying its welcome with its one-hour runtime and bringing little of interest to the

Carrie Newcomer
BEFORE & AFTER
Rouder Records

★★★★★

A sustenance filled horde of songs that run the gamut of humorous to intellectually stimulating

Employing sepia as the principal colour, on this occasion graphic artist Hugh Syme's liner motif is rail travel. In the main railway carriage panel Newcomer sits writing. During our recent interview Carrie related: 'Writing is like breathing, writing is how I process my life.' Life is a journey in which we encounter events infinite and infinitesimal. They may not consciously impact at the time but each will, at some future point, shape our life. Featuring a Mary Chapin Carpenter guest vocal, the foregoing thread subtly weaves its way through the opening, album title song. *Myth* is Newcomer's focus in *Ghost Train*, while the ensuing *I Do Not Know Its Name* signifies belief in some greater being. Moments [sic. events] from Carrie's life illustrate the latter lyric.

Major or minor I believe we humans are genetically programmed to mark our time on Earth with a 'footprint.' That 'footprint' may not be apparent in our lifetime, and that's pretty much the basis for *Stones In The River*. In the United States the Civil Rights Movement gathered momentum four decades ago propelled partly by the power of song. These days, mankind stands at a crossroads in his relationship with this planet. The gospel tinged *If Not Now* may be the early 21st century anthem that galvanises ordinary people into positive action. Walk before you run is an old adage for living life, and in *A Small Flashlight* Newcomer suggests we: 'find our way' a step at a time.

I Meant To Do My Work Today amounts to an honest and personal admission, wherein the narrator simply takes time out to quietly mull over the mysteries of life. That said, I'm sure there was a sly twinkle in Carrie's eye while penning the song. In terms of intent, the thought occurs that *If Not Now* and *A Simple Change Of Heart* are twins. The pivotal (and personal) heartbeat of the latter vocal harmony rich title lies in the line: 'The greatest revolution is a simple change of heart.' *Hush* is a tender love song, *Do No Harm* another WILDERNESS PLOTS song inspired, on this occasion, by author Scott Russell Sanders' one-page long (historically factual) short story *Savages*. In recalling real events, positive and negative, *Do No Harm* reinforces the call for change embraced in *If Not Now* and *A Simple Change Of Heart*. *Coy Dogs*—a mix of dog and coyote—explores those (beings) who struggle with the call of the wild and a domesticated life. Newcomer cleverly draws BEFORE AND AFTER to close with a light touch, in the humorous pairing *I Wish I May, I Wish I Might* and *A Crash Of Rhinoceros*. Featuring thirteen songs, BEFORE AND AFTER Newcomer's thirteenth solo album delivers. **AW**

http://www.carriewcomer.com/
http://www.myspace.com/carriewcomer



musical genre it apes so explicitly. This is a record that means well, but it isn't very good. **AlexC**
www.andywhite.com

Cath & Phil
Tyler
THE HIND
WHEELS OF
BAD LUCK
NO-FL
★★★★★

Cath & Phil Tyler
are a chilling
combination



When Anglo-American duo Cath & Phil Tyler unleashed their 2008 debut DUMB SUPPER it was to universal critical acclaim from the much splintered folk community. Whilst embracing the lo-fi contemporary approach, the duo managed to retain an essence of traditional folk. Which, for the duo, meant that working on a follow-up which would be equally pleasing to the entire folk community would be no small challenge. Undeterred, the pair set to work with Newcastle based producer Andrew Gardiner on the tracks that would form THE HIND WHEELS OF BAD LUCK. The oddly titled collection retains the elements which made DUMB SUPPER so popular, whilst allowing the Tylers to grow as artists. Both borrowing, reinterpreting and creating their own material, THE HIND WHEELS OF BAD LUCK is a sorrowful simple affair.

Phil excels on guitar and banjo alike, complimenting Cath's uninhibited vocal with his harrowing harmonies. Whilst reinventing classics ensures their reputation in both camps of the folk world, it is in fact their newer compositions that demonstrate their real skill. Then youthfully charged, yet somehow wilted beauty of instrumental *Whip Poor Will* exudes excellence. A contradiction to THE HIND WHEELS OF BAD LUCK's woeful sound, it is

an uplifting breeze. Similarly, the apparently optimistic *Castle By The Sea* demonstrate colours to Cath's vocal that warrant further exploration.

Following up the defining DUMB SUPPER will have been no easy task, yet Cath & Phil Tyler make it seem effortlessly easy. THE HIND WHEELS OF BAD LUCK is a sumptuously sublime heart stealer. **JW**
www.myspace.com/cptyl

Char Butler
and Amber
Whitworth
SLEEPER'S
AWAKE
Quantumelody

★★★
Mother and
daughter duo
offer folk-tinged new age album

Somewhere between folk and new age, there is Char Butler and Amber Whitworth's SLEEPER'S AWAKE. Marinated in lush orchestrations, the mother-daughter duo have crafted a semi-decent and sometimes enchanting album which feels like it's meant to be the product of medieval witchcraft with Irish overtones. Daughter Whitworth sings only a little lower than Alison Krauss and sometimes it's difficult to follow the lyrical narrative. These songs are certainly melodic, but they aren't different enough from each other to be sufficiently memorable. There are some highlights, however, including the enjoyable mid-tempo *Place Your Burdens* and *Love Me Dare*—which wears its pop pretensions on its sleeve—and *Waited Till Dawn*. It's perhaps surprising that the duo chose to cover *Let It Be*, and equally surprisingly, they manage to get away with it. The two alternate leads and the whole thing isn't the strings-fest Spector tried to make it. Like any artist who dares to cover



the Beatles and thus tamper with the crown jewels of pop royalty, they are in a no-win situation: such a faithful rendition (or, if we were to be nasty, a karaoke-reading) of a timeless classic can't hope to eclipse the original, but this one certainly compliments it. In the main, SLEEPER'S AWAKE—if heard by fans of new age music—will be undoubtedly appreciated, but served to a folk-country audience, it will probably confuse. **DJ**
http://www.charbutler.com/

The Coal
Porters
DURANGO
Prima Records
★★★★★
Some more
strokes for
folks who love
bluegrass



DURANGO was recorded at Ed Stasium's Kozy Tone Studio which is located on the outskirts of the South-West Colorado town that gives this album its name. Sid Griffin, a son of Louisville, Kentucky, founded the Coal Porters two decades ago and for ten years they purveyed electric country-rock in the mould of the Byrds/Gram Parsons and their ilk. Back then the Porters line-up altered with regularity, but since they went acoustic and bluegrass around a decade ago it has pretty much stabilised. Well almost, since Jeff Kazmierski handles dogwood bass on DURANGO having replaced Andrew Stafford.

Stasium (Ramones, Mick Jagger) produced, engineered and mixed TWO FISTED TALES (1987) the final studio album by the Long Ryders, Griffin's rock'n'roll band, and he also fulfils those roles here. DURANGO is a mix of thirteen band-penned originals and covers. Griffin penned five songs, Scot Neil Robert Herd three more with lyrics that indulge in

...the new releases

tongue in cheek humour, Dick Smith authored *Roadkill Breakdown*—which features mandolin solos by Tim O'Brien—while the band's Canadian bred fiddle virtuoso Carly Frey arranged a couple of traditional tunes—*Sail Away, Ladies!* on her own, and *Pretty Polly* with her band mates. Finally, aided by its writer on mandolin and vocals, Carly is the lead voice on the Porters interpretation of that old Peter Rowan chestnut *Moonlight Midnight*, the other cover song being Neil Young's *Like A Hurricane*.

The Porters hi-energy brand of outlaw bluegrass apart, DURANGO includes a short video documentary mostly featuring the band in concert. As for subject matter, the lyrics to the band's original songs runs the gamut of Civil Rights and freedom (*No More Chains*), a soldier blinded in a foreign war (*Permanent Twilight*) and consuming alcohol to excess (*Closing Time Genius*). **AW**
<http://www.myspace.com/thecoalporters>

Darrin James Band
THE LOVELY UGLY TRUTH
Bridge Street
Records-BSR002
★★★★☆

Lyrical honest songs put over with gritty and heartfelt vocals and great musical backing

The Darrin James Band are based in New York and on this album they combine blues, country and soul with blistering guitars and a rock steady rhythm section, all topped off with soaring horns. Standout tracks include the catchy country-rocker *I Was Wrong* with a wonderful New Orleans jazz-styled horns intro, with Darrin's growling voice superb. *Someone To Depend On* is again a catchy tune that you can tap your feet to and Darrin's vocals go from a low growl to powerfully gritty. *Green Card Rag* is a fine protest song and *Shallow Grave* is a slow country ballad with wonderful pedal steel from Gerald Menke.

Darrin James wrote all but one track on the album, that being the Bob Dylan penned *Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You* of which the band do a great version. Good CD by a fine band, if you are into acts such as Tom Waits, John Prine, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen etc., then give this album a listen. **DK**
www.darrinjamesband.com

Devine's Jug Band
TERRIBLE OPERATION BLUES
Porto Franco
Records PFR002
★★★★★

A marvellous album which makes you want to dust off those dancing shoes just so you can shake a tail feather

Demonstrating that today, in the financial crisis noughties, the music which was at its most popular many decades ago, is having a resurgence. The number of old-time

sounding bands currently gigging is phenomenal, and with San Francisco-based Devine's Jug Band the music which was long thought to have died will continue to prosper. With a wide range of traditional instruments, ranging from the washboard to the jug, this is one heck of a brilliant album.

By far the best track of the sixteen has to be *El Remolino*. An outstanding and energetic sound is created right before your very ears which is full of life and bursts of enthusiasm that makes you want to get to your feet and dance your troubles away. Having heard the kazoo in only a few songs before, *The Lindberg Hop (Overseas Stomp)* was certainly a revelation as it certainly demonstrates that you do not have to concede style to contemporary values to make an excellent tune. This sound is created on several other tracks, but is most evident on *Beaver Slide Rag*. The washboard playing is by no means amateur, and along with the fiddling you seem to be spoiled for choice. The jug playing by Pete Devine is excellent here. He seems to make the simplest of notes seem easy, which is remarkable in itself due to the jug being a tricky beast to master.

Congratulations are in order to Devine's Jug Band, for they are responsible here for creating a thing of beauty. If you weren't into this type of music before, you are guaranteed to have changed your mind after listening to this album. **RH**
www.devinesjugband.com
www.myspace.com/devinesjugband

Dolly Parton
LIVE FROM LONDON
Sony/BMG 13481
01978
★★★★★

London clearly loves Dolly Parton

British music fans reserve an especially rapturous welcome for their American idols who take the time and trouble to tour over here. Elvis Presley would have been even more revered had he fulfilled his ambition to perform in the UK instead of being restricted by his self-serving manager Tom Parker to a brief stopover at a remote Scottish airfield on his way home from Army service in Germany in 1960. Modern US country stars like Alan Jackson and George Strait are considerably diminished by their cynical refusal to reward their European fans' loyalty by actually playing here more than once in a lifetime. They should take a leaf from the book of an even bigger celebrity, Dolly Parton, who is selling out vast venues every time she visits dear old Blighty. The reason, of course, is that unlike the worthy, but wooden, Straits and Jacksons of this world, dynamic Dolly has a personality the size of Tennessee and the talent to match. This lovely lady has paid her dues throughout five decades of quality performance and has demonstrably earned the right to be acclaimed in every corner of the globe.

This excellent CD/DVD package captures a magical night at London's

02 Arena in 2008 when Ms Parton and her band wowed the 18,000-strong audience with a show that underlined why Dolly is such an enduring legend. The cleverly paced set mixes old favourites like *Jolene* and *Coat Of Many Colours* with newer material such as *Backwoods Barbie* and *Shinola*. Dolly herself is in fine form, both vocally and in dispensing the anecdotes that make her concerts such a warm and personal experience. There are precious few artists who can reduce an aircraft hangar like the 02 to the size of your average living room by dint of emotional appeal and audience rapport, but Dolly manages it with consummate ease. She has them all singing along to the big hits—*Islands In the Stream*, *Here You Come Again*, *Nine To Five* and her heart-rending Porter Wagoner tribute *I Will Always Love You*—while you could hear a pin drop during the superb a cappella, *Little Sparrow* and a gospel-styled tour de force entitled *Do I Ever Cross Your Mind*, sung in perfect harmony with her impressive backing singers.

The DVD is a welcome bonus, as it contains concert and rehearsal footage intercut with insightful interviews with Dolly herself and her musicians and support team, plus shots of her meeting and greeting the fans. London clearly loves Dolly Parton and this aural and visual gem is simply capital. **BK**
<http://www.dollyparton.com/>

Hayseed Dixie
KILLER GRASS
Cooking Vinyl
★★★★☆

Hayseed Dixie should continue along 2008's NO COVERS road

'Drinking ain't fun like it used to be' bleats Barley Scotch on *Tolerance* on American rock bluegrass quartet Hayseed Dixie's eighth studio album KILLER GRASS. Having initially formed as a country tribute to AC/DC, the group line-up has changed several times within the band's ten years at the forefront of the country-rock scene, yet the quality of their work has never altered. Ever the rock fans, Hayseed Dixie include five covers amongst the twelve tracks of KILLER GRASS. Most interestingly they close *Omen* with their take on the Prodigy's *Firestarter*. It is choices like these which make Hayseed Dixie stand out from the crowd, yet their pastiche cover of the Queen classic *Bohemian Rhapsody* has the opposing effect. Whilst comical in its charm, their version of the karaoke favourite seems out of place. It certainly brings a smile to the face but is not a patch on Mercury and friends.

Adversely, when Hayseed Dixie write comically, there is earnestness in their humour that appears effortless. Opener *Tolerance* is easily the album's standout contribution. Full of dry humour and seamlessly performed, it is immediately evident why the group who started out as a tribute have gone on to wider acclaim in their own right.

Whether the cover versions, which constitute half the album's material,

are worthwhile is dependent upon your definition of what a cover version should be. If you feel a cover should rework a song in the artists' own style without necessarily enhancing the original, then KILLER GRASS always succeeds. But if you feel a cover is only credible if the alterations warrant the reworking, then Hayseed Dixie fall short on a couple of occasions. However, with their octane high energy and musical dexterity, KILLER GRASS is a thoroughly enjoyable effort from a band who should possibly move on from their hillbilly homages. **JW**
www.hayseed-dixie.com

Heather Bristow
HOPE ON THE VINE
Heifer Music HRO
12009
★★★★★

American bluegrass gal now based in UK delivers fine album

Just once in a while a CD by an unknown artist drops through the letterbox. You slip it in to your player with no great expectations, but the moment the first few bars waft from the speakers it arrests your attention and holds it until the final notes fade away. You may sit silently for a while wondering why you haven't heard of this artist before and then feel compelled to listen to the album all the way through just to ensure that what you heard was as impressive the second time around! Helen Bristow and HOPE ON THE VINE proved to be just such an album—and the reason why you haven't heard of this artist before—unless you have attended some of the British bluegrass festivals over the past few years, is because this is her debut album.

Raised in North Carolina, she learned to sing choral music through her father, a fine tenor, who was a choir director. Later, she studied classical violin, but was smitten with bluegrass following a visit to a banjo shop in Florida and being invited to join in with a group of singers and musicians who were enjoying a jam session. To cut a long story short, she eventually joined a bluegrass band and sang and played with it for the best part of five years. Interested in writing from an early age, Heather eventually gained a Master's Degree in poetry, came to Britain in 2001 in order to be part of the long established Sore Fingers gathering, where she met Daniel Bristow, a violin maker, whom she eventually married and with whom she currently lives in Gloucestershire.

HOPE ON THE VINE comprises 15 original songs. The majority of these are deeply personal, like *Who's Gonna Tend Your Grave* which she wrote on the tenth anniversary of her father's death, or the poignant *I'm Ready*, inspired by something her grandmother told her about the weariness she felt at living alone for too long. There are wistful songs of lost love, a couple relating to home-sickness and a true story about an alcoholic woman, tired of being a burden on her children,

