

certainly not evident when hearing his self-titled debut album

With a true country start, *Martha* finds him singing in a sad tone, much like Willie Nelson. With an eerie bedtime story sound, or a Tim Burton Humpty Dumpty if you may, the use of the pedal steel and fiddle does keep the country element alive throughout but orchestrated in such a way it makes the hairs stand up on the back of the listener's neck. Demonstrating some stonking instrumentals, *Hey Hey Hey* is a mixture of 1970s West Coast with English punk vocals added in for good measure. The electric guitar playing is certainly similar to the time when T-Rex ruled London, and it is most refreshing to hear the sound of the much-missed Bolan here in just the guitar playing alone. *Sugaree* begins as though it might evolve into a stadium rock track, but instead we are treated to a tune with a positive groove that coerces the toes into tapping along with its beat.

Biased I may be about the pedal steel, the interaction between this wonderful instrument and the electric guitar is so refreshing. If only all pop-country albums were like this then the genre itself would be taken more seriously by the wider public, rather than just those who rave on about the past masters much to the amusement of those around them. A cracker of a debut album. **RH**
www.milesnielsen.com
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Natalia Zukerman
BRAND NEW FRAME
Weasel Records
★★★★

In terms of presentation this ten-song collection of folk-pop originals embraces jazz and blues inspired interludes

Manhattan raised Natalia Zukerman is the daughter of a Grammy winning classical violinist-conductor and a flautist-novelist mother. Her sister is an opera singer. Following a trio of releases on her own Talisman label, BRAND NEW FRAME, produced by Willy Porter, has been released by the latter's label Weasel Records.

Hardly taking time to draw breath between the words and lines, the rhythmically insistent title track opens this collection and broadly acknowledges the latter genres. *Favourite Shirt*, which follows, adopts a less frantic pace as Zukerman recalls: 'We were just a short story, love with no glory, Virtue with no sin, over before we begin', while the bluesy *Song For Ramblin' Jack* is both personal tribute to a fellow travelling musician, and observation on Natalia's musical ethos. *Only Trees* is a quirky worded road song that reflects upon the passage of time and landscapes that alter. In summation, Zukerman's BRAND NEW FRAME reminds me of early career recordings by Patty Larkin. **AW**
http://www.nataliazukerman.com/
http://www.myspace.com/nataliazukerman

Nelson Brothers
PLACES IN THE HEART
nbmp003
★★★★

Roots and a whole lot more

The Nelsons established their place in the London roots scene back in 1993 with their album *HOMETOWN*. The gravel-voiced, guitar-jangling (yes, with a hint of Knopfler) country and rock was quite hypnotic yet, 16 years later, this is the follow-up. In the past couple of years the pair, Simon and Steve, have been working with Hollywood and TV actress Elizabeth McGovern, crafting her band Sadie and the Hot Heads and, in fact, the Hot Heads (minus Elizabeth) is the line-up here. The old Nelsons sound is recognisable but now with a hint of jazz, almost a lounge version of country-swing, double bass throbbing amid echoing keyboards and driven softly but firmly by former Goldfrapp drummer Rowan Oliver.

Still to the fore are Steve's vocals and Simon's twanging guitar, both benefiting from the tight, reflective backing. There are a host of good songs...the superb, Brel-tinged *Song Of Frankenstein*, the soulful *Walking My Baby Back Home*, and the swing of *Monkey On My Back*. An impressive record which takes roots music off in a new direction. **ND**
www.nelsonbrothers.co.uk



Norma MacDonald
THE FOREST FOR THE TREES
NM-08-02
★★★★

Well put together collection combines classic country with modern vibe

This, the second album from Canadian singer songwriter Norma MacDonald, is the perfect introduction to one of the purest new female voices you're likely to hear.

The sound is country through and through, blending a traditional, authentic sound with a more contemporary feel. Ten self-written and produced tracks hang together with pleasing harmony to produce an album that is both soulful and reflective.

Her voice is, for my money, at its heartbreaking best on *Pulling On A Thread*, a ballad in the classic country mould that resonates with beauty and intelligence. *A Little Longer*, the opening track, is another fine brooding effort, while foot-tapper *Sand* is more upbeat, an infectious melody infused with some lovely pedal steel.

Norma lists Ryan Adams, Lucinda Williams and Gram Parsons among her influences, and there is no mistaking the mark of a country-steeped childhood (she was raised on 'AM country radio stations and Willie Nelson cassettes') in her work today. Born in Cape Breton and now based in Nova Scotia, Norma is building a fanbase in her native Canada, although her first album *NOTHING*



IS WHERE IT WAS also garnered favourable reviews in the UK.

As well as a stop-you-in your-tracks voice, Norma has the benefit of a talented band: Charles Austin (Superfriendz, Buck 65) on guitar and banjo, Adam Fine (Gypsophilia) on bass, Dale Murray (Cuff the Duke, Hayden, the Guthries) on pedal steel and a host of others. There is no doubt Norma has a huge talent and a voice that will appeal to country fans on this side of the Atlantic. The big question is whether she has that extra something to stand out in a very crowded marketplace. On the evidence of this collection, she must have a pretty good chance. **KL**
www.normamacdonald.com

The Oak Ridge Boys
A GOSPEL JOURNEY
Gaither Gospel Series. CD. SHD 2793
★★★★

A return to their gospel roots by this veteran and well-loved country group

Having been a gospel group for very many years before they hit it big in the country world in the 1970s and 1980s, this CD finds the boys coming home to their gospel heritage. It has an excellent start with *Jesus Is Coming Soon* and includes many fine contemporary country gospel songs such as *I Know*, the Dallas Frazier classic *The Baptism Of Jesse Taylor* and a few of their own country hits such as *Elvira*. A couple of fine Bill Gaither tunes are also featured; the classic *Because He Lives* and *Loving God, Loving Each Other*, plus some newish (at least to me) gospel songs before they round off the album in rousing style with *Where The Soul Never Dies* and *Just A Little Talk With Jesus*. Throughout this album the star quality of the Oak Ridge Boys' vocals are very evident, so with such superb singing it makes for a very enjoyable listen. However, there is also a DVD out which I have not seen, but if history repeats itself with past Gaither releases it could well be that the DVD will be the better buy, as this CD is merely a studio recording (good as it is), but the DVD would appear to be a live recording also featuring the Gaither Vocal Band. Take your pick! **DB**



Remington Ryde
THE RYDE
Green Valley Records
G163V1208
★★★★★

Outrageously stunning bluegrass that sings the worries of life with such ease

Formed in 2002 for the purpose of promoting bluegrass in their native Pennsylvania, this four-man bluegrass band is unlike most of the other bluegrass bands out there—and believe me there are a number in the UK, that seem to just sing the songs of the past and current bluegrass legends. Immaculate their own rendition may be, you sometimes find yourself thinking:



'Do we really need another rendition of an Earl Scruggs traditional?' Unlike these bands, Remington Ryde is one that not only records their own material but said material is really something else. With eight of the twelve songs on this album written by members of the band, it sure is something else to hear the quality of bluegrass played with such finesse.

Not to be confused with Vic Reeves version, the band's mandolin player Danny Stewart penned *Dizzy* sounds like a Jimmy Buffett track due to its tongue-in-cheek humour. Despite it being an instrumental track, the mandolin and banjo seem to copy each other in an updated version of *Duelling Banjos* with the mandolin taking the place of the acoustic guitar. Always succeeding in raising a smile or three amongst those I have played this to, it has such a refreshing sound to it which sadly doesn't happen that much anymore as only the minority of bands seem to offer this energetic injection that bluegrass sees from time to time. As with *Dizzy*, the mandolin playing by Stewart on *Can't Seem To Stay Ahead*, along with the banjo picking that more than amply supports the fiddling, is simply wonderful. Led by some stonking lead vocals provided by Ryan Frankhouser, who actually penned this track, this is one tune which will certainly be found in Austin anytime soon. Once again penned by Frankhouser, *Puddle Of Tears* opens delightfully with an admirable banjo rhythm. This song keeps true to the old timey tradition of tunes which could be played around a campfire and relying only on a strong voice and vigorous playing but combines those aspects with a modern sound which, like the former aspect, sounds old timey. It's old timey all round with this track, but my goodness it sure is one hell of a triumph as it creates such an awesome sound.

As previously mentioned, this is one fantastic band which kicks into shape the bluegrass groups that seem to have taken their eye off the ball recently. With a UK tour planned for spring 2010, Remington Ryde is certainly at the top of my list to catch live. I urge you to do the same. **RH**
www.remingtonryde.com

Rachel Harrington with Zak Borden
IN THE WOODS: LIVE IN THE NETHERLANDS
Skinny Dennis Records
★★★★★

A smorgasbord of gospel, country and bluegrass songs

During the summer of 2008 Rachel Lyn Harrington, from America's Pacific North West, spent three months touring the UK and Europe. *IN THE WOODS* is a concert series that began a few years ago in the village of Lage Vuursche, located in the South Holland province of Utrecht, and the venue has quickly become an essential 'must play' stopover for North American singer-songwriters.

Performed a cappella Harrington

