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DENNIS BRENNAN

#123/212 APRIL 2007

LOOKING BACK ON
NotSXSW 2007

•
JOHN THE
REVEALATOR

•
FREEFORM
AMERICAN
ROOTS

#91

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ROOTS BIRTHS &
DEATHS

•
REVIEWS

(or not)

DENNIS BRENNAN

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ELANA JAMES

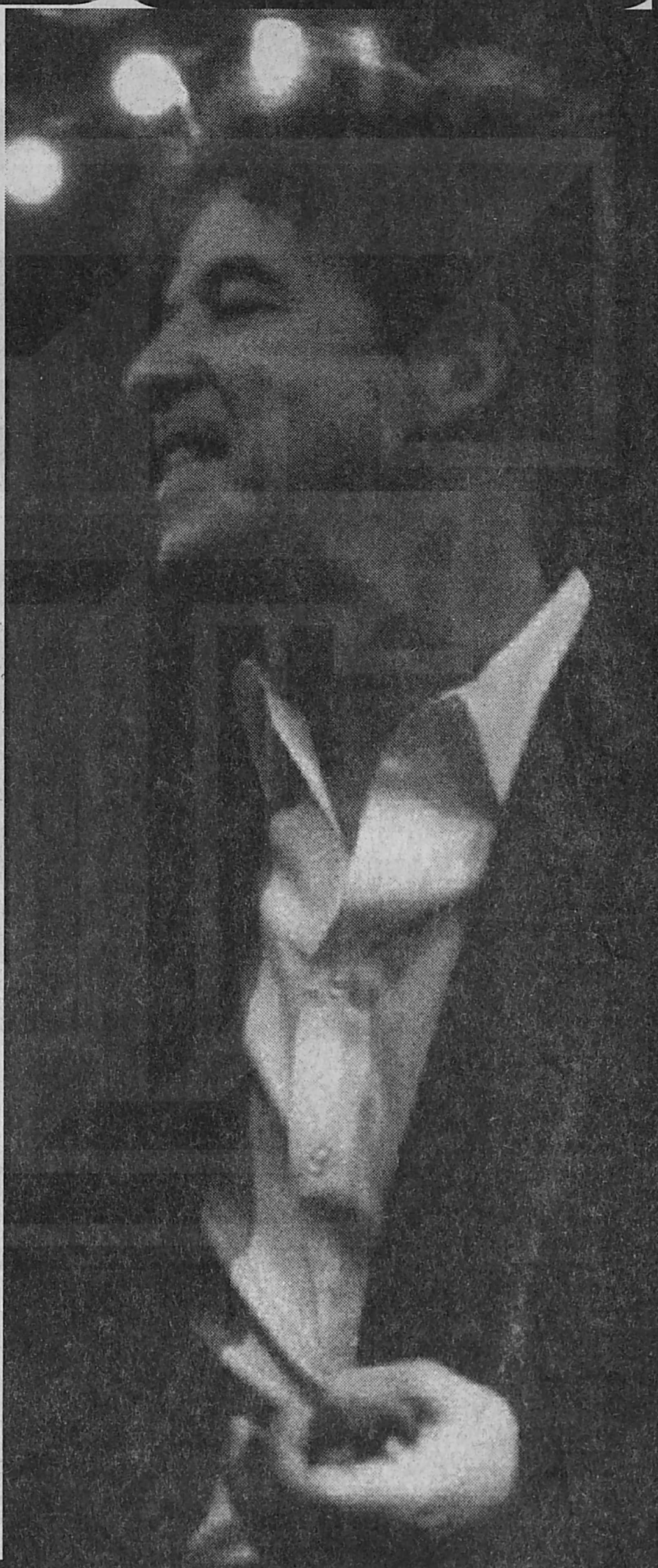
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LITTLE PINK

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CHARLIE RICH

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THE WILDERS

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LUCINDA WILLIAMS

photo by John Strymish



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DURING MARCH 2007

#1 SOUTHERN CULTURE ON THE SKIDS:

COUNTRYPOLITAN FAVORITES

(Yep Roc) *BP/*JZ/*MDT/*RC

- 2 Elana James (Snarf) *HT/*RJ
- 3 Cam Penner & The Gravel Road: Felt Like A Sunday Night
(self) *FS/*MM/*OO/*RA
- 4 John Rauhouse's Steel Guitar Rodeo (Bloodshot) *B&C/*BR
- 5 The Wilders: Throw Down (Free Dirt) *DA/*DR
- 6 Lucinda Williams: West (Lost Highway) *AOK/*HP
- 7 Audrey Auld Mezera: Lost Men and Angry Girls
(Reckless) *BL/*KF/*RW
- 8 Ry Cooder: My Name Is Buddy (Nonesuch) *BS/*MR/*TA
- 9 Graham Parker: Don't Tell Columbus (Bloodshot) *JF/*JS
- 10 Johnny Bush: Kashmere Gardens Mud (Icehouse) *JP/*SC
- 11 Joe Ely: Happy Songs From Rattlesnake Gulch (Rack 'Em) *MF
- 12= Bill Kirchen: Hammer Of The Honky Tonk Gods
(Proper American) *SH
- Uncle Earl: Waterloo, Tennessee (Rounder)
- 13 Willie Nelson, Ray Price, Merle Haggard: Last Of The Breed
(Lost Highway) *EW/*JM
- 14 Dale Watson: From The Cradle To The Grave (Hyena) *CP/*MT
- 15 Asleep At The Wheel: Reinventing The Wheel (Megaforce) *KR
- 16= Richard Dobson: Back At The Red Shack (Brambus) *DJ/*PP
- Lucy Kaplansky: Over The Hills (Red House) *JB
- 17 Patty Griffin: Children Running Through (ATO) *ND
- 18= Martha Scanlan: The West Was Burning (Sugar Hill) *CS
- Storyhill (Red House) *JMB
- 19= Mary Chapin Carpenter: The Calling (Zoë) *DY
- Rachel Harrington: The Bootlegger's Daughter (Skinnydennis)
- Last Train Home: Last Good Kiss (Red Beet) *TF
- 20 Olav Larsen & The Alabama Rodeo Stars: Love's Come To Town
(Hyena) *AA
- 21= Anna Fermin's Trigger Gospel: Go (sighlow)
- Miss Leslie & Her Juke Joints: Honky Tonk Happy Hour
(Zero Label) *KD
- 22 Tommy Womack: There, I Said It! (Cedar Creek) *EB
- 23 Jay Boy Adams: The Shoe Box (Rockin' Heart) *DS
- 24= David Childers & The Modern Don Juans: Burning In Hell
(Little King) *DG
- Keith Greeninger: Glorious Peasant (Wind River Music) *KB
- Will T Massey: Slow Study (self) *TO
- Son Volt: The Search (Transmit Sound)
- 25 Mike Aiken: Just Add Salt (Northwind) *MB
- 26= Dolly Varden: The Panic Bell (Undertow) *KM
- Jorma Kaukonen: Stars In My Crown (Red House)
- Doyle Lawson & Quicksilver:
More Behind The Picture Than The Wall (Rounder) *CL
- Lil' Bit & The Customatics: Lone Star Girl
(Tomcattin' 'Round) *TG
- Wylie & The Wild West: Bucking Horse Moon (Dualtone)
- Neil Young: Live At Massey Hall (Reprise) *KC



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WHERE MUSIC STILL MATTERS

*XX = DJ's ALBUM OF THE MONTH

Freeform American Roots is compiled from reports provided by 140 freeform DJs in the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Uruguay. More information can be found at www.accd.edu/tcmn/far

ELANA JAMES

THE WILDERS • THROW DOWN

(Snarf ****.5/Free Dirt ****)

By chance, I was at Hot Club Of Cowtown's first Austin gig, and standing in The Horseshoe Lounge parking lot, I was just amazed by the fiddle player and, rather tactlessly, said as much to the guy standing next to me, a well known local fiddle player (he grunted and said, "Yeah, she's OK"). I'm not sure why, or what, if anything, it means, but while I've heard many male fiddle players I admired, the ones who've absolutely blown me away are almost invariably women, Eithne Hannigan, Carrie Rodriguez, Susan Voelz, Anti Van Klewitz, Máiread Ní Mhaonaigh, the Quebe sisters, most recently Kendel Carson and, of course, Elana Fremerman, or, as she now calls herself, Elana James. Hot Club's insistence on making the same album over and over was mitigated by the pleasure of watching James' evolution. To describe her singing, when Hot Club first arrived in Austin, as tentative would be a compliment, and neither she nor Whit Smith exhibited any grasp on showmanship (which is a bit odd for a Western Swing outfit if you think about it). Being drop dead gorgeous didn't really compensate for her lack of stage presence, but that was then and now is a different matter. With her Continental Two, Beau Sample bass and Luke Hill guitar (both of San Antonio rockabilly wunderkind Cave Catt Sammy), heavily reinforced by David Biller guitar, Joe Kerr piano, Bruce Backman clarinet, Mark Hallman, who coproduced with James, brushes and Johnny Gimble playing violin on *Silver Bells* and electric mandolin on *Goodbye Liza Jane*, James steps on to center stage (ironically, Smith, who hired her for his NYC ensemble Western Caravan is now in her band). It has to be said that, as a singer, James does rather better with the sophisticated jazzy numbers, Duke Ellington's *I Got It Bad (And That Ain't Good)* and *I Don't Mind*, Eubie Blake's *Memories Of You* and her own *Twenty-Four Hours A Day* and *Oh, Baby*, than with straight Western Swing style ones, *Goodbye Liza Jane* being particularly disposable (though her version of Dylan's *One More Night* works fine). However, while her fiddle playing is still technically dazzling, she doesn't seem to have developed as much personality in it as she has with her vocals.

♦ Add to my list of knockdown fiddle players the name of Betse Ellis. The Wilders, Ike Sheldon lead vocals/guitar, Phil Wade banjo/dobro/manolin/vocals and Nate Gawron string bass/vocals, out of Kansas City, MO, are an engaging hillbilly/honkytonk string band that can really deal with material like Hank's *Won't You Sometimes Think Of Me* and *Blues Come Around*, Johnny Cash's *Belshazzar*, Jerry Irby's *Drivin' Nails In My Coffin* and, a standout recorded live, Carter Stanley's *How Mountain Girls Can Love*, but Ellis is their secret weapon, separating them from the pack. That, as producer Dirk Powell said to himself when he first heard the group, is some fiddlin'. With bags of energy and several excellent originals on top of the splendid covers, The Wilders really deliver. There have been times, many, many times, when I've thought, "Well, that's forty minutes of my life I'll never see again," but records like this make all the slogging worthwhile. Marvellous. **JC**

LITTLE PINK • GLADLY WOULD WE ANCHOR

(Night World ****)

Next in line, I was waiting for Lyle Lovett to finish a radio interview when he was obviously stunned by a very silly question about majoring in journalism, and in the awkward silence, I offered that Merle Haggard thought that country lyrics were just journalism put to music. After that, we got on like a house on fire. How Lovett would have fared as a journalist we'll never know, but, in my experience, journalists should stick to scribbling, musicians to picking. I've spent some very painful moments trying not to listen to execrable bands fronted by colleagues, while most songwriters come across as semi-literate in prose. I will, however, gladly make an exception, both ways, for Mary Battiata, lead singer and songwriter of DC-based Little Pink (a nod to The Band). As (I think) I said about *Cul-De-Sac Cowgirl* (Adult Swim, 2001), covering revolutions, civil wars, famines and two genocides, as a *Washington Post* foreign correspondent, is not the normal stuff of singer-songwriter bios, and though she doesn't directly address any of her experiences—the album title, taken from a Ralph Waldo Emerson essay, "Gladly would we anchor but the anchorage is quicksand," might perhaps be read as a summary of them—it's hard not to imagine that they informed her lyric sensibility. Equally, filing stories on horrors almost beyond words may help explain the unsettling edginess and concision of her songwriting. Part twang, part folk, part pop, Battiata is not the most accessible of songwriters, but she's all the more rewarding for that. **JC**

LUCINDA WILLIAMS • WEST

(Lost Highway *)

Saw Lucinda on *Late Night with Letterman*. Is she alright? She looked like death warmed over. Is she alright? She sang like a robot. Is she alright? And the song was shallow and repetitive, repetitive, repetitive. Is she alright? Then I heard the album and that was about the best thing on it. Is she alright? Before she broke through with *Car Wheels*, Williams made three albums in a row without a single naff song, since then she's made three in a row without one song I can tolerate. **JC**

LOOKING BACK ON NotSXSW (AND SOME SXSW)

Every year, I invite people I recall seeing out and about during NotSXSW to let me know what stood out for them, positive and negative. This is not as easy as it may sound as, after two of three days of nonstop music, unless you're taking notes, who, what, where and when all start to blur together, but this, so far, is what I got for 2007.

ARNOLD BOECKLIN

(Austin)

Best new to me artist: Eilen Jewell
Best set of the day: Gurf Morlix & Sam Baker
Always, and still, good: Bill Kirchen
Needs to get professional about performing: Brennen Leigh

MARY BATTIATA

(Little Pink, DC)

Best Of Show: Gurf Morlix & Sam Baker's shared set at Opal D's on Thursday night. Awesome yin and yang, between the songwriter's polestars of gimlet-eyed despair (*Killing Time In Texas*) and pure joy (Baker's song about getting up early and seeing the morning). New To Me & Wonderful: The Ginn Sisters at Edge City's showcase on Thursday. Excellent songs, serious spunk, beautiful Texas sister harmonies. Bruce Hughes delivering his crazy-funny, Coward-esque tunes during The Resentments show on Sunday night at the Saxon Pub. Expert tenor vocals, and bass playing. A highlight of the week for me. Gene Elders' fiddle parts during Betty Elders' wonderful set—haunting, spare, gorgeous. Even Better Than Expected: Jimmy LaFave at Opal D's on Friday night. Saw him and band last year for the first time and this year was blown away all over again, by his singing and songwriting, and also by the band, who, despite their numbers, never got in each others' way. Afterward, I asked one of the musicians, "So, I guess you guys must've arranged the heck out of those songs...: He looked at me and laughed and shook his head, "Naw..."

Biggest Irritation: the way more and more newspapers (local and *NYT*, among many), seemed to stow ever more of their conference coverage online this year. Very annoying for people neither surgically attached to a Blackberry nor inclined to be.

Most Entertaining Non-Musical Moment: sound-bite heard on WKUT at 4pm or so Sunday, from LA musician Peter Fox, who led a five-piece band for Finnish singer-songwriter Irina Bjorklund's official showcase. Interviewed on his way out of town, Fox expressed the heretical notion that SXSW should pay at least nominal compensation to official showcasers, to offset travel and other expenses. After all, Fox said, it's not like SXSW isn't making a ton of money. The radio report then cut to a reaction from a senior conference official, who, to my ear, sounded a bit stunned that this lone pitchfork of an audio clip had made it onto the airwaves. Disclosure: Fox is a former DC musician and acquaintance who once produced a track of mine for a local compilation CD. I knew he was at SXSW, but I had no idea he'd been interviewed when his voice popped up on the rental car radio.

ROBERT HOWELL

(Salem, OR)

Longtime favorites: Jon Dee Graham, Beaver Nelson, Eric Hisaw, Eleven Hundred Springs, Bill Kirchen, Gurf Morlix, Teri Joyce, Karen Poston, The AM Band, Roger Wallace, Roy Heinrich, Rick Broussard, and The Nortons were all terrific, but I think I have to go with Ted Roddy because I saw him at Ginny's. Bonus points for ambiance.

Newer favorites: Jesse Lee Miller, Brennen Leigh, Rick Shea and The Hacienda Brothers were wonderful, but I think Amber Digby was the one.

People I saw live for the first time: I enjoyed Miles From Nowhere, Cam Penner, Eilen Jewell, The Weary Boys and Shotgun Party, but Miss Leslie & Her Juke Joints really did it for me.

Of course, it just wouldn't feel like a visit to Austin without spending some time with The Cornell Hurd Band. The Texicalli on Saturday was, as always, a good time.

GREG ADKINS

(Gospel According To Austin, Austin)

New to me (though in Austin for couple of years) & incredibly talented/enjoyable: Porter Davis... totally unique & excellent craftsmen... very entertaining. Totally new & incredible: The Phoebee Jeebies. Phoebee Hunt & Emily Gimble (Johnny's granddaughter) are phenomenal players and harmonizers w/ each other. The surprise (no, *shock*) of the group is blues guitarist Nick Curran on drums, incredibly tasteful & full of incredible texture & soul which their older bluer softer music requires!!

Gotta give a heads up about the 'Best White Soul Shouter' few people know of or recognize... Spencer Thomas. When fronting other folks bands like Pat Boyak, The Solid Senders (Keith Ferguson's last band), or The Lonely Knights, this guy can & does sing w/ that raspy soulful voice that touches multiple harmonics as it delivers 'the sands of heaven'!!

PATRICK HURLEY

(Ireland)

Thanks again for what must be the best lineups at any shows anywhere. There were so many outstanding moments for me this year:

Butch Hancock: The maestro put in a first-rate performance.

To finally see the author of *Sonora's Death Row*, Blackie Farrell, perform the song, with Bill Kirchen—I thought I was in heaven (maybe I was, at Opal Divine's Penn Field!)

Miss Leslie & Her Juke Joints: Has any singer ever delivered lyrics with such conviction? She sings like she really means every word of it—and, boy, has she some honky tonk heartbreaking material. Stunning! Sam Baker & Gurf Morlix (Thursday), Troy Campbell (Friday): Staggering to think that these are not major names, selling albums by the truckload.

Great as Ever: Jimmy LaFave and Eliza Gilkyson put in stellar performances at the Hilton (SXSW). Barbara K and her cracking band stole the show at the Austin Music Awards. Alejandro put in possibly his best gig ever at the Continental Club on Sunday night. He and Susan Voelz were on fire.

Biggest Disappointment: Not learning from last year's shambles on timings, Whisky Bar (on 5th Street) got everything screwed up again. This year it was serious—The Hacienda Brothers got to play for only 25 minutes!

JOE PARERES

(Third Coast Music Network, KSYM, San Antonio)

Best of Show: Eilen Jewell—I could have listened to her sing all weekend

Best Unofficial Showcase: 3CM at Penn Field of course.

Best Official Showcase: Signature Sounds, which featured Eilen Jewell, Chris Smither and Kris Delmhurst. All three put on great sets.

Better Than Expected: Deadstring Brothers rocked the Bloodshot party, Black Water Gospel played a nice set at Jo's, and Elana James, with former Hot Clubber Whit

Smith as part of her Continental Two team, proved that the sum is often greater than the parts.

XOXOXO: somehow I've gotta mention Uncle Earl's set at the Continental on Saturday night.

Best Venue: Opal Divine's Penn Field and the Hilton Creekside Lounge. Nothing like a soft backed chair and an airconditioned room at the end of a long day!

MVP: all the sound guys It's amazing that everywhere you go, everything is running on time. I honestly don't know if another city in the world could pull it off.

JIM BEAL Jr

(San Antonio Express-News, San Antonio)

Best of Show: Eilen Jewell. I loved **Boundary County** and have spun it a lot on KSYM, but the live show, with more uptempo material, proved Ms Jewell is the real deal with range.

Best Talent Scout: Chip Taylor just keeps the ace female fiddlers—and the hip songs—coming.

Great as Ever: Bill Kirchen and his band. Blackie Farrell sitting in for *Rockabilly Funeral* and *Sonora's Death Row* was big-value added.

JOE ANGEL

(KEOS, College Station, TX)

The highlight of NotSXSW had to be Betty Elders at Opal Divine's. I guess this would go in the Great As Ever category.

Best show: High Flyers (Elana James, Cindi Cashdollar & Redd Volkaert) at Maria's

New to me and wonderful: Eilen Jewell

Big Disappointment (musically): David Olney at Mother Egan's

Big Disappointment overall: how spread out NotSXSW has become. I spent more time trying to get from place to place than listening to music.

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JOHN THE REVEALATOR

First time I've put out a March issue while working full time at the Day Job, and, far as I can see, amazingly few screwups, considering. My apologies to **Texas Sapphires**, who stepped in at the last moment, for dropping the ball on Dave Insley's revised ad for his bash at Brentwood Tavern. I clean forgot to put in a plug for my Thursday show at Opal Divine's Penn Field, but enough people seemed to figure it out. Otherwise, although Denise Ferri set me straight on the spelling of fellow Delicate **Peggy Santiglia**'s name, I missed the 'Santaglia,' a variant you'll find all over the Internet, in the picture caption. I take no responsibility for any changes in the NotSXSW calendar, it is what it is.

♦ Rock & Roll Trivia: many Internet sources will tell you that The Angels went on to become successful session singers, but, in fact, lead singer **Peggy Santiglia** teamed up with fellow Delicate Ferri and another singer who was in neither group, rather than with Barbara & Jiggs Allbut of The Angels. It just doesn't get much more trivial than that.

♦ Good news for Terry Tyroff from **John R Wheat**: "I read with interest the article on the *Texas Special* broadcast in your March issue. Oh, the ravages of advancing senility! I'm talking about my compadre **TeleBob Simmons**, of course, who failed to mention—or likely remember—that he put a big collection of his production materials for *Texas Special* here at the **Center for American History** at UT-Austin. As I read down the contents, I kept saying to myself, 'got that,' 'got that, too.' Not everything listed is here, but much of it is. Anybody want to be a fly on the wall while Doug Sahm and Doctor John talk at Hill's Cafe at 2am, or hear Evelyn Johnson tell how Johnny Ace took himself out with Russian roulette on Christmas Eve, should get in touch with me (jr.wheat@mail.utexas.edu) and arrange a listening session. And, Bob, phone home."

♦ A while ago, I noted how a few artists have achieved a form of immortality in crossword puzzles, Enya, (Brian) Eno and (Joe) Ely, for instance and for fairly obvious reasons. Still, I was a bit surprised when **Eleni Mandell**, my January cover story, showed up in a recent *New York Times* crossword (clue 'singer-songwriter Eleni and others,' solution "mandells"), which was a gift for me but I imagine a bit of stumper for many. The trick is the second 'l,' you get some choices with Mandel, the obvious one, unfortunately, being Howie, but Eleni is pretty much as famous as Mandells get.

♦ If you could see my copy of the revised 1985 edition of **Country Music USA**, you'd know right off that it got some very heavy use. When I started out in this music reviewing lark, it was my most valuable source, the closest thing I've ever had to a Bible. Thing is, though, it was originally published in 1968, when **Bill C Malone** was teaching history at Southwest Texas State University, so while I'm hoping to get up to San Marcos on April 4th to hear him play and talk at what is now Texas State, I'm a little puzzled by the title of the series his appearance is launching—'Rising Stars Live.' Rising? When you've been the universally acknowledged dean of country music historiography for almost 40 years, it's kinda hard to see where up is.

♦ Though I've known and respected **Mark Rubin** as a 'Gentleman Musicianer and Sorry Entertainer' (his words) for longer than either of us would care to admit, I had no idea he was a member of the International Order Of Odd Fellows, Capitol Lodge #23 ('Keeping Austin Odd Since 1852'). Rather neatly tying in with last month's tribute, Mark tells me, "We at the Lodge got the notion to try and recreate that old Chicago House vibe, starting with a once a month open mic.

Darcie [Deaville] has a new CD out and she'll be going a min-concert in the middle. Sara Hickman asked me if she could host one coming up. If we get the word out, it might be cool. Everybody bitches about how 'things used to be cool' but pitiful few bother to do anything about it. We thought it'd be a good use of our venue to extend the opportunity to recapture a sense of community. All they have to do now is show up." The Lodge is at 6809 Guadalupe and the first in the series is on Friday April 6th, 7-11pm.

♦ *Austin American-Statesman* columnist **John Kelso** started ragging on **SXSW** when the City Council waived \$90,000 in fees, mainly for closing off 6th Street, but really got on their case when he reported (March 25th) that they'd narked on private parties at businesses like a South Congress clothing store that didn't have 'change of use' permits, a new ordinance nobody else knew about, which were then shut down by the Fire Department. And people wonder why I despise SXSW.

♦ Pay close attention because I'm only going to explain this once: **Miss Leslie** is divorcing her husband, former Juke Jointers bandleader **Randy Lindley**. When their knot is officially untied, she's going to marry Juke Jointers steel player **Ricky Davis**. Meanwhile, Randy, who's left the Juke Jointers and is now **Amber Digby**'s bandleader, is also waiting on the decree so he too can get married again—to Amber. When I passed this on to Bill Kirchen, he went, "O-kay... Now that's country." You might think it's a little too country, but it's kinda New Millennium country, Amber, who now lives in Houston, and Leslie are the best of friends, babysitting each other's kids when one or the other has a gig. Still makes a good story though.

♦ Thanks to **Miss Leslie**, I've made my **YouTube** debut (as far as I know). **George Richardson** was videotaping the Thursday show and posted her opening number including my intro. The clip has one of those gobbledygook addresses that I'm certain I'd mistype, but, should you be so inclined, you can find it by searching for Miss Leslie, or, come to that, John Conquest.

♦ OK, random notes from **Opal Divine's Penn Field**, starting with Thursday. **Cam Penner** opened to a smallish crowd, a compensation being that a good third of it was made up of more FAR DJs than you can shake a stick at, from Austin, San Antonio, Dallas, College Station, Boston, New Jersey, Canada, France, Holland, Scotland and Australia. Naturally, things had picked up pretty good by the end of his set as he was followed by **Chip Taylor**, who's managed to draw lightning from his 'lovely and talented' bottle again, this time with Canadian fiddler **Kendel Carson**. At one point Chip had both the blonde Carson and brunette **Carrie Rodriguez** on stage together, which was pretty damn spectacular.

♦ Just before NotSXSW, Rhode Island FARster Dan Ferguson told me that **Eilen Jewell**, the wild card in this bill, had far surpassed high expectations when she played one of his house concerts, and she sure delivered at OD's. One thing that puzzled me, apart from her official showcasing billing her as being from Boise, which she left many years ago, was her guitar player, who seemed oddly familiar, but it wasn't until she introduced the band that the penny dropped. He's none other than the great **Jerry Miller**, of The Spurs, The Coachmen and, most memorably, Jack Smith & His Rockabilly Planet, but fits in real well with Jewell's gentler sound.

♦ Another great guitarist alas delivered the day's big disappointment. **Bill Kirchen** shortchanged us with an abbreviated version of *Hot Rod Lincoln*, a mere 6 minutes 59 seconds, as clocked by Perfessor Tommy

Dukes. Ah well, he was fabulous as ever apart from that, and having **Blackie Farrell** as his guest, singing *Sonora's Death Row*, was a wonderful bonus. Bill tells me I'm the only writer who's picked up on the fact that there's always a Blackie Farrell song on his albums.

♦ Best of Show is a tricky one here, as everybody truly excelled, but I have to go with **Gurf Morlix & Sam Baker**, who combined their sets into one amazing and mesmerizing display of songwriting and performing talent.

♦ I had no idea what to expect with the **Chicago House** tribute on Friday. Au fond, it was targeted at people who were acoustic music lovers in Austin 12 to 20 years ago, and the big question was how many of them were connected enough to find out about the show, let alone motivated enough to come out for it. However, between the venue's old clientele and people drawn by the few NotSXSWy 'names,' we did pretty good. Former Open Mike host **Steve Hopkins**, who arrived before me and was still schmoozing when I left, said, "it was like going to a high school reunion and only the people you wanted to see were there."

♦ Once again, a slow start, but that was fine with opener **Kevin Gant**. "I haven't done this in years, the last thing I need is an audience." Not sure if it was the formal announcement, but **Matt The Electrician** told us that he was no longer a working sparks, "so stop calling me." Matt was one of three ringers in the show, he moved to Austin the same month Chicago House closed, so I put him in to represent 'The Lost Generation.' I had to rationalize like crazy with **Mary Battiata**, who should have been on the Thursday bill, but that didn't work out, and, Canadian visitor **Andrew Walker**, who stepped in to fill most of a time slot left empty by Michael Fracasso getting a paying gig in Wimberly. Still, Peg & Glynda gave them all a big 'We would have booked them' thumbs up.

♦ It was great to see everybody, but my Sentimental Best of Show was dear **Barbara Clark**, one of my favorite Open Mike performers back when, who moved to Fort Collins, CO, 14 years ago and came back specially for the occasion. OK, she did have some new CD business to take care of in Austin, but it was a real treat to see her again.

♦ MVP is easy, guitarist **Larry Wilson**, who wound up on stage with three separate acts, my March cover girl Leeann Atherton—she cleans up pretty good, doesn't she?—Julieann Banks and Christine Albert (who he'd never played with before). Actually, for a supposedly acoustic show, it was pretty rich in great electric players. Apart from Larry, **Jimmy LaFave**'s band included not only **John Inmon** but **Andrew Hardin**. This band is now officially known as Jimmy LaFave & The Overkill.

♦ I'll leave the last word with **Mary Battiata**: "After the Chicago House showcase was over, I went back to the motel and happened to catch **Emma** (Gwyneth Paltrow version) on late-night cable. I'd never seen it, and yet was assailed by deja vu. I couldn't parse it at first, but then, at about 3am, it hit me: I'd just left the same thing at Opal Divine's. That is, a charmed world, dense with shared history and culture, and crisscrossed by bonds of affection and abiding interest. What I felt again and again at Opal Divine's on Friday was the lightness and happiness of being held for a while in a glittering net—one woven by Peg & Glynda and JC, held aloft by all of them with a huge cast of players and audience and on and on. I will remember it."


♦ From elsewhere, overheard by **Jim Beal Jr**, in the Mother Egan's crowd for 'alt-country indie-bluegrass' band **Uncle Monk**, fronted by the onetime Ramones drummer: "Tommy Ramone with a mandolin! That's wrong on so many levels."



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|--|---------------------------------|
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| Charles Thibodeaux | 17th Brennen Leigh, 6pm |
| Every Wednesday, 6pm | Julieann Banks, 8pm |
| Cowboy Johnson | 19th George Ensle, 7pm |
| 3rd Brennen Leigh, 6pm | 20th Lucas Hudgins |
| Julieann Banks, 8pm | & The 1st Cousins |
| 5th Liz Morphis, 7pm, | 24th Love Gone Cold, 6pm |
| 6th Larry Lange's Lonely Knights, 10pm | Julieann Banks, 8pm |
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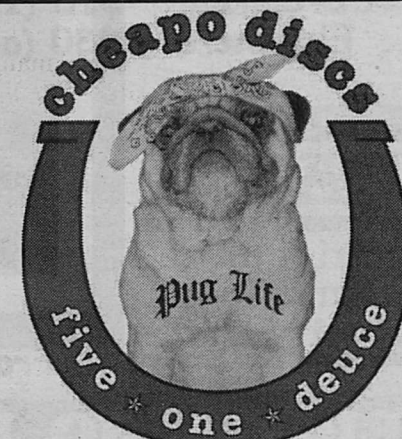
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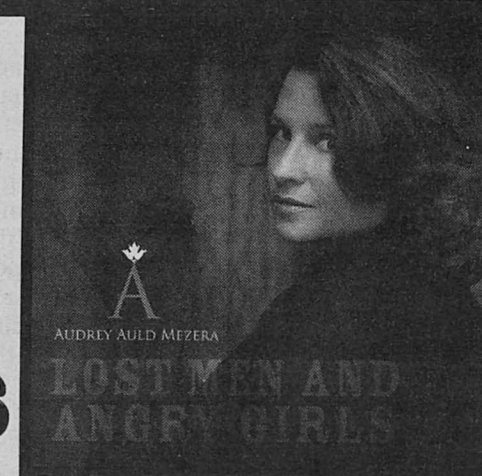
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BIG RADIO, LITTLE LABELS

Early March, Clear Channel, CBS Radio, Entercom and Citadel negotiated a consent decree with the FCC, by which the feds will end their investigation into payola and the four radio conglomerates, while—of course—admitting no wrongdoing, will pay a combined \$12.5 in fines and accept new 'rules of engagement' with the majors and promoters, logging all gifts and promo items so stations can be audited (there'll even be a hot line for employees to report infractions!). Finally, as reparations, they'll provide free airtime for independent record labels. As always with these deals, the devil is in the details, and trying to pin those down is not easy. Where's Eric Boehlert, who covered the Clear Channel beat for *Salon* up to a couple of years ago, when you need him?

For instance, none of the few stories about all this agreed on how much airtime the indies are supposed to get, in fact, in consecutive paragraphs, one first specified 16,000 hours total then 8,200 each (x4 = 32,800). Other sources implied that's it's only 8,200 altogether, and nobody gave a time frame, so it's quite possible the four companies can stretch this access, whatever it is, over a period of years. Also, only one source provided a particularly salient detail, that the set-aside airtime can't be in the middle of the night.

Amid all the fuzziness on such nuts and bolts, one common factor emerged, that this airtime would only be available to labels not owned or controlled by Sony/BMG, Warner, Universal or EMI, though nobody seemed inclined to probe the murky waters of 'control,' or ask for a working definition of 'indie.' If, as seems most likely, it means labels with some fulltime staff, some semblance of rosters and back catalogs and no formal relationships with a major, including distribution, that would make some 3000 candidates for airtime for which they couldn't otherwise afford to compete. If it means anybody who's independently released a record, well, shit, hope you got a track that's less than three minutes long.

Trouble is, however many hours are available and however wide the door, there's not much for most forms of roots music in this deal, because they don't fit into Big Radio's formats. Clear Channel, for instance, has just one Americana station, WTCR, Huntingdon, WV, and that's one of the 400 odd they've put up for sale. So even if a roots label had or hired access, it wouldn't do much good. There is, however, one possible exception. Clear Channel alone has 202 stations designated as 'Country,' and if they were obligated to play a certain amount of indie country, this could be a real shot in the arm for some genuinely talented acts.

Could be. Between the idea and the reality fall a few shadows. One is whether the FCC will buy the shell game of boutique labels that call themselves indies but are ultimately owned or controlled by a major. Another is that all that 'free' airplay will inspire the majors, who one can be sure have paid a whole lot more than \$12.5 million in payola, which, incidentally, is a play on Victrola, which shows how long it's been around, to get even more creative. As one of the astuter bloggers on this subject said, "With new opportunity will certainly come new opportunists." Lastly, commercial country programmers are all too likely to prefer second rate Nashville wannabes over Real Country acts like Amber Digby, who has chunks of people like Sunny Sweeney in her stool. Guess we'll have to wait and see. JC

THE ESSENTIAL CHARLIE RICH DENNIS BRENNAN ENGAGEMENT

(Epic/Legacy ****/Hi-N-Dry *****)

Not long before Nixon resigned, Charlie Rich was invited to perform at The White House, where, in the middle of Watergate, he played *Feel Like Going Home* ("I'm tired and I'm broke and I'm weary, everything I done is wrong and I feel like going home"). How can you not love him? Well, for a start, by not being receptive to overproduction. Rich wrote such great songs as *Lonely Weekends*, *Break Up, Right Behind You Baby*, *Who Will The Next Fool Be?* and, of course, *Feel Like Going Home*, was a tremendous singer who could interpret the hell out of material like *Mohair Sam*, *You Can Have Her*, *When Something Is Wrong With My Baby*, *I Almost Lost My Mind* or *A Woman Left Lonely*, and was an outstanding pianist, but, from Sun's Sam Phillips to Sire's Scott Billington, via such Countrypolitan scum as Jerry Kennedy and Billy Sherrill, nobody seemed willing to back off from the strings and/or choirs, so everything he recorded now sounds dated. The man is always magnificent, the question, as I remarked of Roy Orbison, is how much of the extraneous noise you can filter out (**Big Boss Man; The Groove Sessions** [Koch, 1998], produced by Chet Atkins is one of the easier compilations to take). Rich equally loved, and fused, country, jazz, blues, gospel and rockabilly, which made him a critics' favorite but while the Sherrill et al recordings, with 45 hits, brought 'The Silver Fox' stardom, he eventually walked away from it, burned out. Today, even beneath the Countrypolitan trappings, you can hear a proto-Americana artist, but this package's brightest spot, a 1973 solo demo of *Feel Like Going Home*, will break your heart if you start to think what Charlie Rich could have accomplished in a less rigid musical environment.

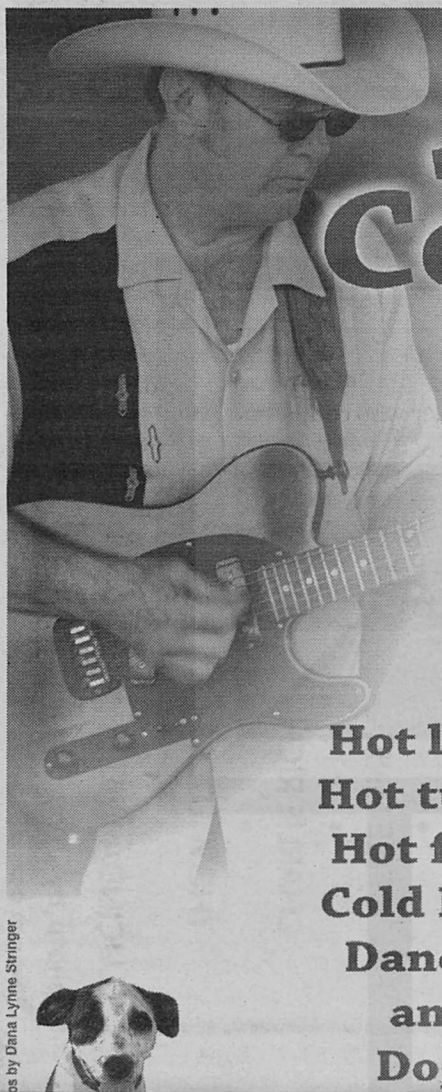
Which might have sounded something like Dennis Brennan, one of the standouts of whose fourth solo album is a fantastic five minute live version of *Feel Like Going Home*. A couple of years ago, when I first came across Sarah Borges (to whom, coincidentally, I once suggested *Lonely Weekends* as a cover in her set, even though there's a minor credibility problem, she isn't known as "Gorgeous" Borges just because it sort of rhymes), one of my Boston contacts mentioned that her boyfriend was Jake Brennan, "son of the legendary Dennis Brennan." When I asked who's Dennis Brennan when he's at home, she replied, "I always forget that nobody outside Boston has ever heard of him, but he's a legend here!"

Listening to the half studio, half live **Engagement**, you can see why. He may not be a vocalist in Charlie Rich's rarified class, but he more than compensates by sheer force of personality, a larger than life presence on the order of Fred Eaglesmith. Like Charlie Rich, Brennan's passion is music. Where most musicians, like it or not, can be pigeonholed, he moves freely and, which makes him really unusual, convincingly between roots rock, soul, blues, country and jazz. Other terrific covers in the live segment are Merle Haggard's *You Don't Have Very Far To Go* and Woody Guthrie's *Hard Travelling*, but the bulk of the album is made up of 13 originals, some of which are quite astonishing, my favorites being *When You Were Loving Him* and *It Ain't What You Think It Is*, on which, incidentally, he leaves Taylor Hicks for dead as a blue-eyed soul singer.

Brennan attributes his eclecticism to growing up with pre-format radio, when stations would, for instance, play Buck Owens and Wilson Pickett back to back, "I didn't really know about country or R&B, to me it was all just music." He admits, though, "It's been a problem all my life. There was a limited time when you could play different kinds of music, but for a long time it's been one style and that's it." Lead singer with various 'almost signed' 80s Boston rock bands, Brennan struck out on his own, making a couple of albums for Upstart in the 90s, another for Esca in 2000, but it's only in the last three years that he's found a formula that allows him a free hand: a steady band and a residency. Every Wednesday, he and his four piece play at Cambridge's Lizard Lounge ("the rest of the week is built round that").

Working up new originals and covers on the fly in the dressing room ("we rehearse about twice a year"), Brennan's emphasis is on changing up the show every week—having created an audience for his protean, no two alike approach, he wants to keep it. One result is that eleven weeks of live recording, during which Brennan and the band pretty much forgot that tape was rolling, yielded some 80 numbers. "The live tracks are really an accident. We record live in the studio anyway, maybe add a little coloring here and there, because that's the only way we can play. We can't record separately and we don't want to, but when we heard the live tapes, I wanted to use the ones I sounded great on, and the band wanted to use the ones they sounded great on." The ensuing debate yielded eight stellar tracks.


Though Brennan hasn't played outside Boston since his Upstart days, when he toured New England, he's thinking about coming down to Austin next March, so 2008's **3CM Presents** may have a strong Beantown flavor, at least I'm already hoping Sarah Borges will make it and Eilen Jewell, this year's big hit (see *Looking Back*) will return, but judging by the live tracks on **Engagement**, I think Brennan had better be the headliner—only the foolhardy would want to follow him. JC



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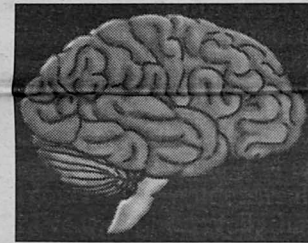
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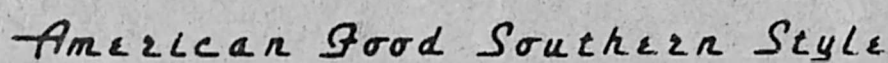


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----- Jim Ed Brown • 1934 Sparkman, AR
2nd -- Emmylou Harris • 1947 Birmingham, AL
3rd -- Dooley Wilson • 1894 Tyler, TX
----- Don Gibson • 1928 Shelby, NC
----- Richard Thompson • 1949 London, UK
4th -- Al Dexter • 1905 Jacksonville, TX
----- Muddy Waters • 1915 Rolling Fork, MS
5th -- Lord Buckley • 1906 Stockton, CA
----- Cowboy Jack • 1931 Whitehaven, TN
6th -- Vernon Dalhart • 1883 Jefferson, TX
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