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BILL KIRCHEN

#28/117 MAY 1999



**JOHN THE REVELATOR
COMINGS & GOINGS**

REVIEWS

******* (or not)**

•
BOOZOO CHAVIS

•
STACEY EARLE

•
**ALEJANDRO
ESCOVEDO**

•
ROSIE FLORES

•
**JON DEE
GRAHAM**

•
CODY HUBACH

•
FLACO JIMENEZ

•
BOB KELLY

•
BILL KIRCHEN

•
**CARL SONNY
LEYLAND**

•
RIP MASTERS

•
**ANDRE WILLIAMS
& THE SADIES**

pardon me, I've got someone to review

BIG SANDY & HIS FLY-RITE BOYS "RADIO FAVORITES"

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BOOZOO CHAVIS & THE MAGIC SOUNDS WHO STOLE MY MONKEY?

(Rounder)

Magazines like *Offbeat* try valiantly to be all things to all people, but that inevitably carries the risk of losing perspective, which the New Orleans music monthly did rather emphatically in its April issue, linking its cover story interviews with the extraordinarily silly headline "Beau Jocque & Boozoo Chavis: Who's The Boss?" That's about the most fucking stupid question I've ever heard, though Jocque at least, and to his eternal credit, knows the answer, but then our cats know the answer to that one. You don't often see albums labelled "Parental Advisory, Explicit Content," at least not in my line of work, and even less often an album which states that certain tracks "are not suitable for airplay." I'll say. Punch up *Uncle Bud* or *Deacon Jones*, rerecordings of 45s that, as Michael Tisserand remarks, "Could only be found under the counter of better record stores throughout Southwest Louisiana," and you can kiss the station's license goodbye. One does rather wonder why Chavis didn't go the whole hog and use the original lyrics of *The Monkey And The Baboon* rather than Sonny Boy Williamson's cleaned up version, *Bottle Up And Go*. Always the main representative of the rural, house party tradition, as opposed to Clifton Chenier's urban dancehall style, Chavis seems to making a deliberate statement here, offering the exact antithesis of that Nouveau shit, bedrock zydeco at its finest, and dirtiest, from the reigning King of Zydeco. **JC**

BOB KELLY • 1954/1959 ROCKABILLY

(Libra)

One of the most interesting tracks on Dragon Street's *Gene Vincent & His Blue Caps: The Lost Dallas Sessions* (#16/105) was the original demo of the rockabilly classic *Git It*, which Vincent later recorded pretty much the way its Fort Worth writer envisioned it, and also of *Somebody Help Me*, recorded by both Vincent and Mac Curtis. The writer was, of course, Bob Kelly, who, presumably inspired by their resurrection after 45 years, has dug up another 20 songs he wrote and recorded in the 50s, plus two high school prom numbers from the soundtrack to *The Demon From Devil's Lake*, a 1960 horror movie shot in Dallas. Though it has to be said that *Git It* was far and away Kelly's finest moment, he had a good voice, teen idol looks (when he was working at Disneyland, they used him for early Pirate Island publicity shots), had a very varied repertoire of originals and his recordings have that authentic raw, minimalist urgency. He also seems to have had rather more than his share of bad luck, but rather cannily released this CD at the recent Viva Las Vegas! rockabilly weekender, one place where never before released 50s recordings by someone previously known, if at all, only from the (B Kelly) in a song credit are going to get the same kind of reaction as hunks of raw meat get from starving wolves. With *The Lost Dallas Sessions* already supplying the cream off the top, this is kind of hardcore, but adds a fresh chapter to the history of Fort Worth/Dallas rockabilly. **JC**

ROSIE FLORES • DANCE HALL DREAMS

(Rounder)

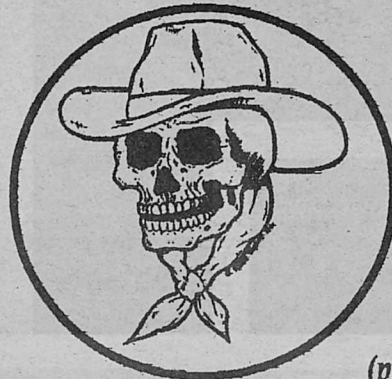
Every couple of years or so, I'm routinely called on to do something in which I take absolutely no pleasure—trashing the latest Rosie Flores album. And here we go again. The Flores discography is a mystery to me, here's a woman who, if you see her perform, you'd figure has the potential to knock out at least passable, possibly even pretty cool, records, and she blows it every time. Usually, I offer up the hope that she'll get round whatever her problem is by making a live album, but this time I'm fucked because this *is* a live album. Well, sort of. There's absolutely no evidence coming out of the speakers that there was an audience present, and friends who were at Cibolo Creek Country Club told me the place was treated like a studio, so the evening was the usual tedious stop and start retakes, fiddling around with gear and conferring—if you find watching paint dry overstimulating, I recommend being a bystander at a recording session. Not only did Ms Flores fail to grasp the basic warts and all concept of live recording, she, once again, was unable to come up with anything in the way of decent material, apart from Wanda Jackson's *Funnel Of Love* (but cf Marti Brom's far better version on *Lassoed Live!*). Best you can say of the originals is that *It Came From Memphis* is the least awful. While this is in no sense whatsoever a rockabilly album, it's actually even more unpalatable than Flores' *Rockabilly Filly*, quite arguably the worst rockabilly album ever made. In fact, I'm really not sure what you'd call her latest bid for attention, pop seems the best description, and, hell, for all I know people who are into pop might even think it's pretty good. Bit of an insider thing, but I've been told Rounder refused to accept the original mix, so God only knows what that was like if they deemed this version releasable. **JC**

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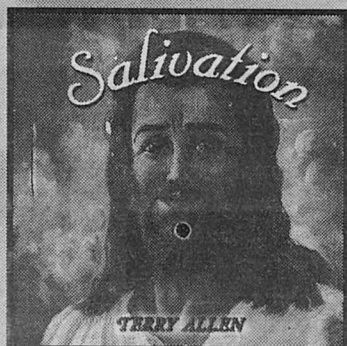
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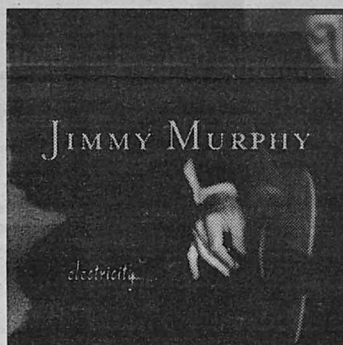
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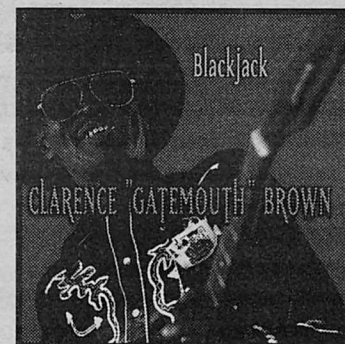
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THE BEST OF FLACO JIMENEZ

(Arhoolie)

Goes to show what sticking around, something conjunto accordionists tend to be rather good at, can do for you. When the teenage Jimenez started out on Rio with Los Caminantes, the group's appeal was as young mold-breaking turks, conjunto punks. Forty years later, Arhoolie, brushing aside his Rolling Stones, Yoakam, Ronstadt et al credits, showcase Jimenez at "his absolute, traditional, tex-mex, conjunto, dance till you drop, authentic, crying in your beer, best!" Their selection is anchored by the CD version of *Ay Te Dejo En San Antonio y Mas!*, which combined the 1985 Grammy winning LP with most of 1979's *El Sonida De San Antonio*, and from which a full half of the 16 cuts are taken. Earlier days are represented by Rio's mid 50s *Negra Traicon*, featuring a vocal duet with Henry Zimmerle, from Flaco's *First!*, three tracks from *Un Mojado Sin Licencia*, 1955-67 recordings from José Morante's *Sombrero/Norteño* labels, and *Un Mojado Sin Licencia* itself, live at an Austin dance with Fred Ojedo, from the 1975 documentary *Chulas Fronteras*. On the other side, *Flaco's Amigos* (1988) contributes three numbers, an instrumental bolero with Ry Cooder on slide guitar, another bolero with Ojeda's duet vocals and Peter Rowan singing *The Free Mexican Airforce* as a vals. This latter seems somewhat incongruous, but otherwise, if Arhoolie says this is Flaco's best, that's good enough for me. There seems a rather charming symmetry in the fact that the Tex-Mex accordionist's first supporter in the music business was Hymie Wolf, and his most consistent champion has been Chris Strachwitz. **JC**

RIP MASTERS • BIG RED '57 CARL SONNY LEYLAND • I'M WISE

(Rattler/HMG)

Perusers of rockabilly album credits may recognize Masters' name as house pianist on revival releases by Rollin' Rock, which also put out his debut *Rock That Rock!* Alternatively, they may recognize it as author of Ray Campi's theme song *Rockabilly Man* or Jackie Lee Cochran's *Trouble Is Her Name*. Both songs are among the ten originals, supplemented by five covers, including the standout *Ramshackle Shack*, but if Masters has his moments as a songwriter, can hold a tune and picks some fair guitar, his album is inevitably dominated by his sensational boogie woogie piano playing. If you were at Cornell Hurd's annual Texicalli Grille extravaganza this year, I need hardly elaborate, if not, I can hardly improve on Hurd's comment, "He's the real deal." Though very much in the Jerry Lee tear 'em up tradition, Masters wears his influences far more loosely than most of the notoriously derivative revival players.

◆ Perusers of Hightone album credits may, equally, recognize British-born Leyland's name as the label's quasi-house pianist. Leyland, who spent some years in New Orleans piano bars, joined Big Sandy & His Fly-Rite Boys in 1997, and has since played on albums featuring the entire outfit, the group without Big Sandy, Big Sandy without the group, Deke Dickerson and Biller & Wakefield, among others. On his solo debut, Leyland, backed by guitar, drums and bass, covers a lot of roots ground, Chicago blues (I *think* the title track is from the documentary *Sittin' Pretty*), rockabilly, country, R&B, rock & roll and skiffle, with covers ranging from Al Dexter's *Wine Women And Song* to Big Bill Broonzy's *Midnight Steppers*, while showing a special affection for Roosevelt Sykes (*Ruthie Lee* and *Sunny Road*). Eight of Leyland's 14 cuts are originals and it has to be said that he's a more consistent writer than Masters, but if his material is stronger overall, when it comes to pumping piano, I have to give this round to Masters. **JC**

STACEY EARLE • SIMPLE GEARLE

(Gearle)

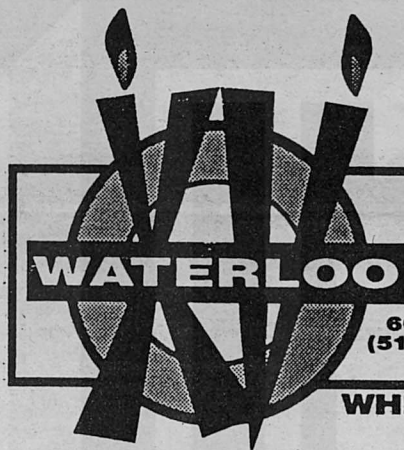
Very approximate, but if you think of Nanci Griffith's voice early on crossed with the lessons learned maturity of Betty Elders, you'll have a rough idea of how Stacey Earle sounds. Usually, if an album seems to have anything going for it, I play it two or three times right off to try and get a preliminary take, so it was a bit of a worry to be real disinclined to sit through this again right away, but then when I did get back to it, it seemed richer and subtler than first time round. Even so, Earle and her four piece Jewels don't provide much variety of pace or texture, so her 15 originals kinda blur together, and, though it is growing on me, the album seems to go on for an awful long time. Paradoxically, coming to music as an adult, after raising a family and ending a 16 year marriage, is both Earle's greatest asset and biggest liability. Refreshingly free of conventional packaging and delivery notions, she also doesn't seem to have a clue how to package and deliver songs. So this is rather a tough call, how much work are you willing to put into an album? Stacey is, of course, Steve's sister, and he makes an appearance singing harmony on one track (another features the wonderful Andrea Zonn on viola), but I have to wonder what, if anything, we can infer from the fact that her album, though distributed by E-Squared, isn't on her brother's label. **JC**



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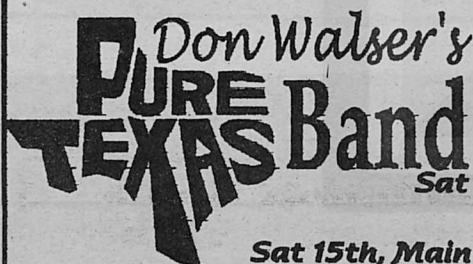
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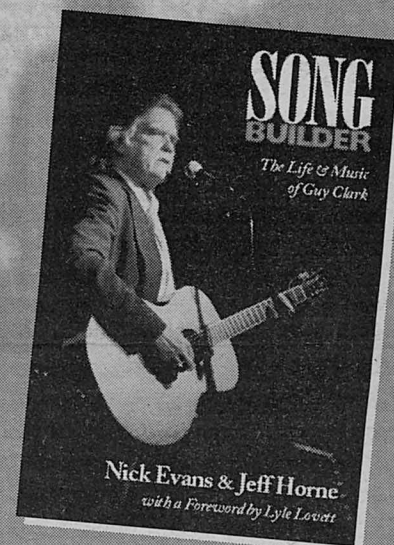
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ALEJANDRO ESCOVEDO
BOURBONITIS BLUES
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(Bloodshot/New West)

Very revealingly, Escovedo thanks the Bloodshot crew, in the liner notes, "for making music fun again." After a succession of mediocre, and, by Austin standards at least, hideously expensive albums for Watermelon and Ryko, Escovedo is blossoming in his new lo-budget home, coming up with yet another album that, like *More Miles Than Money*, justifies a critical reputation that, based on his live performances, was all but inexplicable in terms of his discography. With The Alejandro Escovedo Orchestra, he synthesized the disparate elements of his musical background, punk, art rock, cowpunk and roots rock, into a wonderfully rich, distinctive and atmospheric sound, one, however, that his previous labels were unable or unwilling to put on record in uncompromised form. With Joe Eddy Hines guitar, Brian Standefer cello and David Perales violin as the core players, the nine tracks include Ian Hunter's *Irene Wilde*, Jimmie Rodgers' *California Blues*, John Cale's *Amsterdam*, Lou Reed's *Pale Blue Eyes* and Gun Club's *Sex Beat*, but after being filtered through the Orchestra, they're as much Escovedo's as his four originals. One of the latter is the standout *Everybody Loves Me* ("but I don't know why") and if you've wondered this yourself, it's because he's always made great music, but only recently started making great records.

◆ Like Escovedo, a veteran of The True Believers, which, not too put too fine a point on it, began to disintegrate as soon as he left, Jon Dee Graham also reinvented himself post-Troubs, as a singer-songwriter in, well I don't want to say the conventional sense, because he's no more conventional than Ray Wylie Hubbard, Troy Campbell or Michael Fracasso, with whom he can reasonably be bracketed, but hell, you know what I mean. Problem with Graham is that he's always been a big favorite with the *Austin Chronicle* and, naturally, whenever one finds oneself liking somebody they do, one just have to wonder if one's not making an egregious error of judgement. However this time I have to go along with them, Graham really is outstanding. On the follow-up to Freedom's *Escape From Monster Island* he aces an acid test of a singer-songwriter album, his 12 originals are so strong that it's difficult, if not impossible, to pick either a most or least favorite. Backed by Mike Hardwick guitars, dobro and steel guitar, Michael Ramos B-3 and Wurlitzer, Rafael Gayol drums and George Reiff bass, with contributions by Patty Griffin, Trish Murphy and Kacy Crowley, among others, Graham's songs fairly crackle with subliminal charge. **JC**

CODY HUBACH • I Got The Blues

(self-released)

With Townes Van Zandt, Blaze Foley and Jubal Clark gone, and Calvin Russell in exile, Hubach is the last survivor of the hard living Austin singer-songwriters of the 70s and, sadly, he was diagnosed with cancer just as he started recording this album. Though he's doing well now, this knowledge, as you might imagine, had a very impact—this isn't just another album, it's a musical testament, 15 of the songs he's been performing for the last 25 years. Only two are originals, five are by the late Bill Wilson, others come from Jesse Winchester, Dan Penn, Jimmie Cox, Roky Erikson, Powell St John and Dylan. Like Townes, Blaze and Jubal, Hubach's trademark is unaffected sincerity and gritty emotion. Watch out for benefits on the 15th and 30th of May. **JC**

ANDRE WILLIAMS & THE SADIES
RED DIRT

(Bloodshot)

Covering Johnny Paycheck's (*Pardon Me*) *I've Got Someone To Kill* takes some balls at a gig, putting it on record, well, this had better be good, that's all I can say. Andre Williams made a fair name for himself with a kind of proto-rap, raunchy R&B recitations like *Bacon Fat*, *The Greasy Chicken* and *Jail Bait*, but seemed to have vanished until Hanson made the mistake of covering his *Shake A Tail Feather* without consulting him, which cost them a pretty penny (and who more deserving?). Anyway, that experience seems to have galvanized him back into action, and here he takes a crack at transferring his style to country, backed by the Toronto outfit perhaps best known as Neko Case's touring band. Alongside Paycheck's Lil' Darlin' classic are songs by Harlan Howard (*Busted*), Leon Payne (*Psycho*), Lefty Frizzell (*I'm An Old Old Man [Tryin' To Live While I Can]*), Eddy Arnold (*Easy On The Eyes*) and The Bottle Rockets (*Queen Of The World*), plus eight originals, of which *My Sister Stole My Woman* has way the best title, but *She's A Bag Of Potato Chips* is outstandingly the catchiest. This is tough to review because the crux is Williams' style, which people will react to, for or against, on a more or less instinctive level. Personally, I always thought the truly chilling thing about (*Pardon Me*) *I've Got Someone To Kill* was Paycheck's understated, almost throwaway, nonchalance, presenting the song as a casual barroom conversation, so when Williams infuses it with psychotic menace, well, it's just not as effective. But that's me. **JC**



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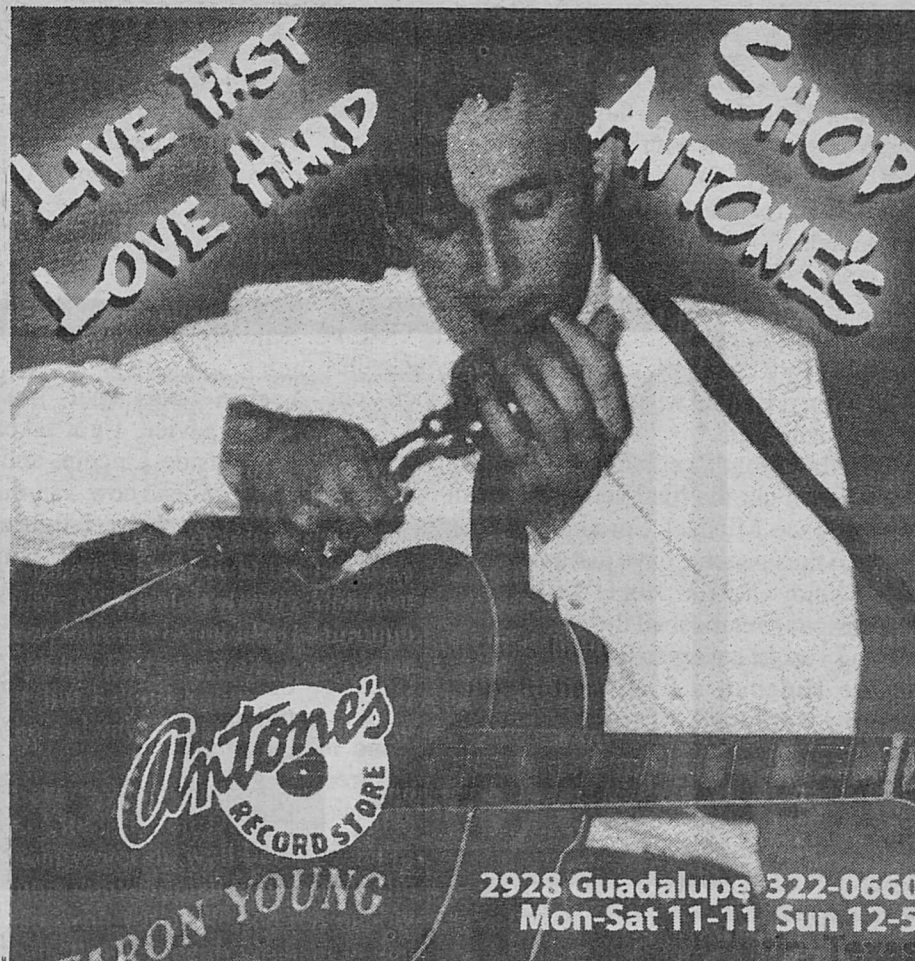
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JOHN THE REVELATOR

For a few minutes, I thought this column would have to open with a more than usually abject apology for error. I was browsing a secondhand record store, saw a **Lowell Fulson** LP and thought, "Oh God, no, surely I didn't do anything that crass." Cheered only by the thought that surely someone would have got on my case about it, I checked as soon as I got home and, thank God, it was the record company, can't remember which, that got it wrong. Bit bad when you can't even spell your artist's name right.

◆ PS to last month's column: it only occurred to me after I'd run out the final version that not only does Austin, pace Michael Corcoran's remarks on the Chicago music scene, have just as many "fake hicks" as the Windy City (do people really call it Chi-town? Just curious) but most all the *real* hicks are out there playing Top 40 covers to linedancers. Also, thinking of The Hideout, a friend who was in Chicago recently, confirmed the reports I've gotten on how great it, Fitzgeralds's and Shuba's all are, and it occurred to us that in order to make up a list of three great Austin clubs, no matter what kind of music you're into, you'd have to include *at least* one that doesn't exist anymore.

◆ Had a rather fraught shift on **Third Coast Music Network** last month. Everything went swimmingly until six o'clock, when I was closing out, or rather not closing out because the DJ for the next show hadn't shown up. Not having any idea what the protocol was in such situations, I kept going, figuring he was bound to turn up sooner or later. In fact, he never did. Then the seven o'clock guy arrived early, but he only had an hour's worth of material and didn't want to start before his regular time. So, round half six, I hit bedrock, got out Terry Allen's **Lubbock (On Everything)** and a Sandy Denny compilation and spent the last half hour alternating tracks off them. Which I guess is some kind of musical statement.

◆ So, last month I delivered a paper at the University of Nebraska's annual **Great Plains Symposium**, which had Music and Dance as this year's theme. Whole gang of us there from Texas, Butch Hancock and Jimmie Dale Gilmore, The Texas Playboys, Conjunto Aztlan, Lubbock DJ and cowboy musician Lanny Feil and, from Alpine, his sidekick Scotty Brown, all freezing our thinblooded butts off in the sub-Arctic weather they call Spring up there. Anyway, my contribution was *The Panhandle Mystery, or Why Lubbock?*, kind of a spoof academic examination of hypothetical causal factors behind the Allen, Ely, Gilmore, Hancock, Pierce phenomenon. Funny thing, I had my notes typed up in what looked like a neatly structured sequence, and as soon as I got started, the whole thing fell apart, which I guess goes to show that the entire subject is inherently nonlinear and it's pointless trying to impose any sense of order on it.

◆ It's been 25 years since I was a baby academic (heading for the exit when I found out how many fucking meetings you have to go to), so I'd forgotten the nature of the beast. Before I got rolling, I ran a reality check on those Lubbock names past the audience and was pretty amazed when everyone seemed to be familiar with them. I mean, much as I love Jo Carol, I figured at the very least I'd need to provide some background information about her role. Later on, however, when I remarked on this to postgrad student Akim Reinhardt, whose own paper, I may say, was on the late, great Jesse Ed Davis, he looked at me rather pityingly and said, "John, none of us had ever heard of Jo Carol Pierce before, but we're academics. We're not going to admit there's something we don't already know."

◆ Judging by the number of people who observed "I've never been to Nebraska," the chances of any of you winding up in Lincoln seem fairly remote, but on the off chance, I can offer a couple of Travel Tips. First, avoid The Cornhusker; "Nebraska's Grand Hotel" is twice as expensive and not as nice as, say, any Best Western I've ever stayed at. Second, exile Barbara Roseman, of Lubbock Or Leave It, told me to get a steak at Misty's ("and you'll never eat beef in Texas again"), and, while I'm sure this is sound advice, I got taken to Merle's, in Emerald, just outside Lincoln, and they serve a mighty fine piece of dead cow. Anything else? Oh yes, up to my last night there, I figured Nebraskans just prefer godawful beer, rock bottom being reached at the Conjunto Aztlan concert when the selection was Bud, Bud Lite or Miller Lite, all of which are against my religion. In desperation, a couple of us went to the bar next door, and by God they had Shiner Bock (which amazed Barbara), so at least one oasis in the gnats' piss wilderness is The Ironhorse.

◆ One very curious thing about **Conjunto Aztlan's** show was that of the capacity crowd of 400 odd, a good half, perhaps even a shade more, were Anglos, which is something you hardly ever see in Texas. Not only that, but a fair proportion of them were the kind of baseball cap and Tommy Hilfiger shirt wearing young men whose Texas counterparts wouldn't be caught dead at a Tex-Mex occasion. I thought that spoke very well of Nebraska.

◆ MIA for a good few years, **Steve Jordan** is about to resurface with the first of ten CDs, on his own El Parche (The Bastard) label, which he's selling on the Internet (www.elparche-sjordan.com). As an inducement, if you buy the complete set, you'll get a free black eyepatch that will qualify you for discounts to all future Steve Jordan shows. One Halloween, **Benjamin Serrato** of Jet Set Zydeco dressed up as Steve Jordan, only he couldn't find a right eyepatch anywhere, so he settled for a left eye one. Guess who was the only person who noticed? You got it.

◆ One bit of sad news, assuming you share my enthusiasm for (most of) the albums put out by Checkered Past, it that **Eric Babcock**, A&R man extraordinaire, who brought us Paul Burch, Johnny Dowd, Lonesome Bob, The Flatirons and much more, has been let go. I always thought of it as Eric's label anyway, whatever the corporate structure, so this was a real shocker to me. He couldn't tell me what happened, mainly because he doesn't know himself, but as he'd already started up his own label, Catamount, on the side, it's not like he's going to fade away, least of all from these here pages. In fact, he hadn't started feeding Cary Swinney into the Checkered Past system yet, so he's already got one fine artist right there.

◆ If the cover was a bit aberrant (see Boozoo Chavis review), the April *Offbeat* had a fascinating story about Excello swamp pop guitarist **Guitar Gable**. Seems that while Gabriel Perrodin was in voluntary retirement from music—he quit in 1980, but was lured back by CC Adcock in 1995—somebody else was claiming his stage name and reputation, not to mention royalty checks. In fact, Thomas Gable even persuaded the Music Maker Relief Foundation, a charity for indigent blues musicians supported by BB King, Eric Clapton and Taj Mahal, to use him, as Guitar Gable, in an ad campaign financed by RJ Reynolds. The two curious things about this story are that a) Foundation director Tim Duffy seems to think he was doing Perrodin a favor by paying somebody else claiming to be him, and b) it seems rather amazing that there was any money to be made out of posing as Guitar Gable in the first place.

◆ Along with the unfortunate **Bob Kelly's** CD (see Reviews) came a 16 page booklet on his noncareer, with a rather bitter sub-text fairly obvious below the ostensible stiff upper lip. However, he's remarkably nonchalant about what turned out to be his high point, appearing on a 1957 bill with Jackie Wilson, Bobby Day and Big Jay McNeely. "At the end of the night, the producer came by to tell me that I had done a great job. He said that he was surprised by the enthusiastic audience response because, really, the only reason that I was on the show in the first place was that they had to have a white act before they could rent the Legion Hall."

◆ Classic Nashville story in a recent *Blue Chip Radio Report*. Seems **Vince Gill** was in a fender bender and after they'd taken care of the usual insurance stuff, the guy who'd rear-ended him handed Gill a demo tape of his songs. Bill Miller reports that Gill graciously accepted it.

◆ With the demise of **KOOP** clearly imminent, an interesting story, all off the record right now, is floating around. Seems the University has decided not to do the most obvious thing, give KOOP's daytime hours to KVRX, with which it shares the frequency, but to take it away from the students altogether and make it KUT2. In principle, of course, one should be agin this, but in practice those PC wankers on the board of trustees have so undermined the concept of student-run radio that it's difficult to get real indignant about the imposition of sensible management on this snakepit. How it would work out is, of course, another question. Ideally, I'd like to see KUT, retaining DJs like Rod Moag, John Hauser and Tom Manke, schedule programming they currently have no available slots for, Americana, country, rockabilly and Western Swing, Cajun and Zydeco, *Mountain Stage*, and so on, though I've got an nasty feeling we'll wind up with even more fucking blues and jazz shows.

◆ News to me, though I gather well known to everyone else in **Americana** radio, is that whenever anyone uses the word to describe a musical genre, they ought, in theory, to put TM after it, because it's a registered trademark. I say in theory because, of course, it ain't gonna happen in real life. Apparently one **John Grimson** registered it back in 1996, and I'm checking into a couple of ugly stories about his attempts to build an Americana empire. More later.

◆ A footnote to the cover feature, **Bill Kirchen** stakes his main claim to fame as being one of the creators, along with Blackie Farrell, of Jim Haber's stage name, back when he was Asleep At The Wheel pianist in San Francisco. "We started with Fats Cramer, but ended up with **Floyd Domino**." Oh yes, and a classmate of Bill's in high school was James Osterburg, aka Iggy Pop. Also, I know you've seen the cover pic, taken at the old Zona Rosa incidentally, at a show where I was one of the very few people in the audience who wasn't a guitarist, before, but Kirchen's new publicity shots weren't going to be ready in time, and what the hell, it's a classic image.

† JESSE STONE

Ahmet Ertegun once remarked that Jesse Stone, who died April 1st, aged 97, "did more to develop the basic rock & roll sound than anybody else," though he received little acknowledgment. The grandson of Tennessee slaves, Stone was long an arranger and producer for Atlantic Records, where he worked with Ruth Brown, Ray Charles, Big Joe Turner, The Drifters and The Clovers, but it was as a writer, under his own name and the alias Charles Calhoun, that he made his enduring mark on rock & roll history. Among his notable, and enduring, works were *Money Honey*, *Flip, Flop And Fly*, *Lipstick, Powder & Paint*, *Smack Dab In The Middle* and *It's My Time*, but he would still have carved his niche if he'd only written *Shake, Rattle & Roll*.

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BOUGHT IT NEW IN '52

Part of the genius of the term 'Americana' is that when Rob Bleetsstein sold it to *The Gavin Report* as a brand new radio tracking category, it was immediately recognized by one and all as retrospectively describing and unifying 30 and more years of musics, many of which, until then, had been getting by on creative use of hyphens, often multiple hyphens, or invented, and usually ephemeral, catchphrases. Uniquely, far as I can see, Americana was invented, coming into being, virtually overnight, as a full-grown musical genre complete with its own history, its own legends and a population that ranged from venerated elder statespersons to brash, iconoclastic youngsters.

◆ In other words, Americana bypassed a process that normally takes decades, and one consequence is that, unlike, say, alternative rock, rap, hip hop, even grunge, hell even punk, it has a large cadre of active senior citizens and I don't mean there's a fairly wide age range, I don't mean AARP discounts, I mean Americana artists still out there performing whose straight life contemporaries long ago retired and moved to Florida. So, Americana also has benchmarks built in, the kind of standards which jazz and blues, say, took many years to develop. It's one thing, for instance, to set yourself up as a hotshot guitarist in alternative rock, quite another when you might conceivably find yourself on the same bill as Link Wray.

◆ Or, come to that, Bill Kirchen, who got me thinking about all this in the first place. Not that Kirchen is a senior citizen, but he's been such a seminal proto-Americana figure for so long that he seems to have been around forever. In fact, born in 1948, he's only just turned 50, so, for starters, he's a couple of years younger than Joe Ely, whom nobody yet thinks of as a wrinkly greybeard. Anyway, I got to wondering who Americana's Oldest Inhabitant might be and, between my Births & Deaths database and David Goodman's *Modern Twang*, the national Still Going Strong title seems to belong to Doc Watson, born in 1923, with the Texas regional going to Valerio Longoria, the Louisiana regional to Gatemouth Brown, both born in 1924. By way of contrast, Redheaded Stepchild's collective age is a mere 54 and they'd have to add not one but two more members to overtake these veterans.

◆ Death and failing health have, of course, thinned out the ranks of Americana artists born in the 1920s, but if you factor in the 1930s, even just the early 1930s, the numbers soar exponentially. Looking at a fairly lengthy list of names in the 65 and over category, two rather contradictory thoughts come to mind. One is the amount of evidence it provides for the notion that people don't get older, they get better. Of course, you might say I have a vested interest in this one, but then in the long run we all do (hang around a while, it'll grow on you). On the other hand, there's an almost equal, oh hell, let's be honest and admit an even greater, amount of evidence that most artists hit an artistic plateau at some point and then coast downhill for the rest of their careers.

◆ One of Americana's best qualities is its respect for its origins, but an unfortunate side effect of that has been new albums by people who, if we were all being honest, would be better off sticking to reissues of their glory day recordings. Even though it's only been around for three years or so, Americana already has its own dinosaurs. **JC**

BILL KIRCHEN

For the record: once misinformation creeps into sources like the *All Music Guide To Country*, it takes on a life of its own. So, if you have that, or *Modern Twang*, you might want to change the first line of the Bill Kirchen entry from "b. Jan 29, 1948, Ann Arbor, MI," to "b. June 29, 1948, Bridgeport, CT."

◆ Admittedly, Baby Bill was in Ann Arbor by his 1st birthday, and that city looms large in the Kirchen saga. It was there he learned his first instrument, the trombone, his second, the banjo, and, finally, the guitar. As a college boy, he debuted on the local music scene during the early 60s folk scare, fronting Seventh Seal ("very pretentious"), which Jana Pendragon describes as "psycho folk-rock," getting no argument from Kirchen. At 19, his future began to take shape when he joined a couple of UM graduates, George Frayne and John Tichy, who had a frat/oldies rock band that was beginning to gravitate towards honky tonk country, rockabilly and Western Swing. Of this transformation, Kirchen remarks, "John Tichy was the soul of the band, he was the one who actually knew about people like Merle Haggard and Buck Owens and got the rest of us going on classic country."

◆ However, when Frayne started teaching at Wisconsin State, the band quickly dissipated and Kirchen moved to San Francisco in 1968. Then, with what can only be described as visionary inspiration, he somehow persuaded his former bandmates to quit their jobs, leave their homes and join him, and by late 1969 Commander Cody & His Lost Planet Airmen were up and running as the first, and best, of the hippie country rock bands. "We had a genuine love of the music, but we were allowed to be drunker and stoneder than you can imagine anyone getting away with now, and we never were able to translate our success into sustainability or record sales. We made our own bed."

◆ If Tichy was the band's soul, Kirchen was quite clearly its heart, a proposition clearly borne out by the albums, good when he was on them (up to 1976, then again from 1986 to 1992), duds when he wasn't. Kirchen's first departure started out as a self-proclaimed side project, The Moonlighters, put together as a one-off to back Lily Tomlin, which attracted the attention of Nick Lowe, who produced the band's 1977 album. Touring with Lowe, as he still does, Kirchen found himself playing and recording with Gene Vincent, Link Wray and Elvis Costello.

◆ In 1986, Kirchen moved to the DC area. Taking care of business for Frayne, "Commander Cody's manager, now there's an oxymoron for you!" it didn't matter where he lived, he and Louise, his wife of 25 years, wanted to start a family and they were able to buy the Chesapeake Bay farm on which she had grown up and from which they now run "a mom and pop grocery store of twang." Hooking up with the late Danny Gatton, Kirchen found he was coincidentally close to a town where he could make a living playing locally, "I have to remind myself to go on tour," and since 1992 he and his trio Too Much Fun have been DC's premier roots music attraction, monsterring the local music awards, the Wammies, year after year—"for some reason, they can't get enough of me."

◆ For the best part of 30 years, Bill Kirchen's trademark has been his showstopping version of Johnny Bond's *Hot Rod Lincoln*, which, in order to record in its full eight minute live performance glory, he made the centerpiece of his last album. A tour de force salute to the giants of country, blues, R&B and rock & roll guitar, *Hot Rod Lincoln* is not truly autobiographical (Kirchen's personal heroes are Freddie King, Merle Travis and Cliff Gallup), nor even strictly accurate ("Johnny Cash pulled over" accompanies a Luther Perkins lick, for instance). Rather it's an anthem to a form of music that, when he first recorded the song in 1971, wouldn't have a name for another 25 years. For an extraordinary career as an indefatigable roots champion and outstanding picker, singer and songwriter, not to mention being a really great guy, I hereby promote Bill Kirchen over his former boss, as Captain Americana. **JC**

BILL KIRCHEN • RAISE A RUCKUS

(Hightone)

Most discographies have their ups and downs, but Bill Kirchen's albums just get better and better. During their joint honky tonk/twang tour of Texas, Clay Blaker introduced Kirchen to Tommy Detamore's Cherry Ridge Studio, in Floresville, firing him with the desire to record there and though Kirchen disavows any suggestion that this is somehow a 'Texas' album, Blaker and Detamore, his steel guitarist, are joined in the backup to Kirchen's basic trio by Flaco Jimenez, Ray Price's fiddler Bobby Flores and trumpeter Al Gomez Jr and saxist Louis Bustos (The San Antonio Horns). From his late 70s Moonlighters, Kirchen brought in pianist Austin de Lone to produce. However, the most subtly pervasive influence on the album is Louise Kirchen, once a singer in California country bands (Rowdy & The Rivets, Aces & Eights), who sings duet on Blackie Farrell's *True Love's The Treasure* and wrote three of the 14 songs ("she's always writing, but I only recently realized some of her songs were appropriate for me, we've been very slack about getting them out") which galvanized Kirchen into writing and cowriting a bunch more, including *Interstate*, the obligatory trucking song. The album opens with Bill & Louise's *Girlfriend*, a personal statement about their marriage that'll resonate loud and clear with many, many other couples, and similar recognition coups are pulled off by Kirchen's *Flip Flop*, about his musical education, and de Lone's rockabilly ode to the 45, *Little Bitty Record* (if you don't know what a 45 is, ask your parents, or grandparents). Why am I telling you all this? You're going buy this for kickass guitar playing, and there's plenty of that. After 30 years, Bill Kirchen is still having way too much fun playing music. **JC**

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8th, Floyd Domino's
Western Swing Revue
15th, Jet Set Zydeco
21st, Gulf Coast Playboys
22nd, Cornell Hurd Band
28th, Dale Watson
29th, TBA*