

NEW RELEASES

Honor Finnegan THE TINY LIFE

No Label

★★★☆☆

Honor Finnegan
could be mistaken
for Christine Lavin's
quirky little sister



Chicago raised, New York City based Honor Finnegan (vocal, ukulele) was one of the half-dozen New Folk Song Contest winners at this year's Kerrville Folk Festival. Honor lived in Ireland for much of the closing decade of last century where she released the cassette album LEARNING TO FLY in 1996. A decade later HUMAN HEART surfaced, followed by THE TINY LIFE the making of which was funded via Kickstarter.

Back in 2002 Cape Cod based Zoe Lewis was a New Folk winner. Born and raised on this side of the pond, now Cape Cod based, Lewis' (humorous) musical shtick is pure Joyce Grenfell, while Finnegan could easily be mistaken for Christine Lavin's quirky little sister—both are just over five feet tall, and share a refreshing offbeat sense of humour. The support players here include Honor's husband Carl Money (acoustic and electric guitar), plus Jeff Eyrich (upright bass), Eric Puente (drums, percussion), Paul Silverman (keyboards, chimes, organ), Catherine Miles (backing vocals), and Jay Mafale (acoustic guitar, shakers, hand-claps). The latter co-produced this album with Honor and Carl.

The bouncy title song launches the album wherein the 'tiny' obsessed narrator affirms: 'Everyone knows that love is the treasure that we're all searching for,' and it's followed by the Sam Cooke/Lou Adler/Herb Alpert collaboration *Wonderful World*—the (album's) only cover song. Another testament to love, the *We Are Hearts* melody soars skyward and swoops back to terra firma. *Life Is Short* is a slyly worded, cautionary black comedy—sic. 'A facelift gives you a permanent grim, You look like a freakin' alien'—that's summed up by: 'Whatever you do, whatever you try, You're gonna get old and you're gonna die.' The *Internet Junkie* narrator confesses: 'There's something on my back and it's worse than crack.' That latter, one of Honor's winning songs, mentions 'Facebook, the World Wide Monkey, e-mail, DSL and more' and includes a funky 'Google It' segment replete with a 1960s girlie chorus. Beware the contemporary ills that have

been visited (by computer techies) upon mankind!

The heartfelt *Pictures Of Snow* memorialises her grandmother's sister, now deceased, to whom Honor was close, while proof that Finnegan possesses a powerful set of tubes is confirmed throughout *Little Bird*. The melodically fluid *Content* reflects the narrator's happiness: 'It doesn't cost a cent to be sitting with the most adorable man,' while melancholic shadings pervade the ensuing *Undone*. Set in the subterranean world of trains, personal impatience bubbles to the surface in album closer *Waiting*. **Arthur Wood**

www.honorfinnegan.com

Shannon & Heather Slaughter & County Clare ONE MORE ROAD

Elite Circle Music 02

★★★☆☆

More bluegrass ... with a touch of country

It seems that a new bluegrass band floats across my radar every other week. This outfit hails from Virginia and Shannon and his wife Heather show themselves to be skilled and highly distinctive lead vocalists ably supported by their band. Shannon plays guitar, Heather is on upright bass with John Boulware (fiddle), Ron Inscore (mandolin) and Casey Murray (banjo) plus guest players Rob Ickes (resophonic guitar), Tina Steffey (clawhammer banjo) and Mike Johnson (steel guitar). They mix in originals with a handful of old covers revived tastefully.

Shannon and Heather slay *If I Were A Carpenter*, the opening cut, and in doing so, reveal a secret in doing a cover—sometimes it's not about changing a song to reflect your personality, or 'making it your own,' it's simply a case of letting the song be front and centre—which they do rather well here. Shannon's songwriting comes very much into its own with such excellent numbers as *They Never Got The Chance*, a sad song about the lost life opportunities of those taken from us much too young. Heather's evocative voice draws you into the story and makes you care about the characters' lives. In stark contrast there is the fond tribute *When Scruggs Made Me A Star*, on which Shannon's throaty vocal is enhanced by the driving bluegrass arrangement utilising banjo, fiddle, mandolin and vocal harmonies. It



bounces right along, everybody bopping righteous and loose. They turn to a more traditional country sound for their revival of *Pass Me By*; Heather gives the song a straightforward, faithful reading with great interplay between fiddle and steel guitar. A good little album well worth seeking out.

Alan Cackett

www.countyclareband.com

Sam Baker SAY GRACE

Music Road Records

★★★★★

*An impressive 'cradle
to grave' testament
to life and faith*



The sessions for Sam Baker's fourth release took place at South Austin's Cedar Creek Studio, with additions made in Nanton, Alberta and Nashville. Apart from Feast, which Baker (lead vocal, guitar) co-produced with long-time associate Tim Lorsch, the Itasca, Texas bred musician/songwriter steps up to the plate as producer on *SAY GRACE*. Apart from album closer *Go In Peace*, co-written with Liz Rose, Baker is the sole credited composer. The 20 support musicians can be divided into three categories. Lorsch, Mickey Grimm, Britt Savage and Sam's sibling Chris Baker-Davies have played on all his albums. Lloyd Maines, Joel Guzman, Gurf Morlix, Stephen Scott Baker, Steve Conn and Roxie Dean are returning contributors. Finally, there's the Austin area based newcomers Rick Richards, Drew Pressman, Chip Dolan, Oliver Steck, Radoslav Lorkovic, John Ross Silva, Carrie Elkin, Raina Rose and Billy Crockett, plus New York's Anthony da Costa. A mighty and talented brigade.

In creating 14 sonic landscapes, Baker employs 'no two the same' permutations of the instruments and voices. Opening with the title song, therein, in just over four minutes, haunted by her mother, we trace one woman's journey from the blush of just married to a time when: 'She looks at the wrinkles on the back of her hand, Rubs her finger where she wore a wedding band.' In *The Tattooed Woman* as a storm approaches the narrator muses: 'The Lord out wandering with his sheep, Oh so many souls to keep.'

Featuring five support instruments, Elkin accompanies Baker on the chorus to the symphonic *White Heat*. Ageing is again referenced, although it principally charts the death of Cagney's movie character in

1949's *White Heat*. Apparently a portrait of marital harmony, toward the close of *Isn't Love Great*, Baker slyly reveals: 'She wears fishnet, He wears leather, When the boys are at his mother's.' Conn's piano dispenses *Introduction To Feast*, while, inspired by Yeats' *The Second Coming*, *Feast* includes a muscular Gurf Morlix guitar solo, supported by Conn's piano and Lorkovic's accordion. The three-line *Sweet Hour Of Prayer* is sung, four times, a cappella by Rose and Baker-Davies, before morphing into a 90 seconds long Conn piano solo. Scott Baker's pedal steel supports the brother/sister vocal on *A Panhandle Winter*, and *Button By Button* is a melodically sassy, lyrically sensual affair.

On a handful of songs Sam's accompanied by one person. *Road Crew* a detailed portrait of a group of workers set on a Sunday morning credits Lorsch with supplying strings. The lines: 'They are sweeping up the hearts, Putting love away' paraphrases Emily Dickinson's 1924 death paean *The Bustle In A House*. The road and death pervade the ensuing *Migrants* with Joel Guzman supplying accordion and harmony vocal. At less than two minutes duration, *Ditch*, supported by Silva's percussion, is narrated by a construction worker/expectant father with a 'Swift' sense of humour. Dolan's piano and Lorsch's violin execute the mid-album, melancholic *Interlude*. Just short of 90 seconds, inspired by the hymn *Come Thy Fount Of Every Blessing*, Lorsch's cello underpins album closer *Go In Peace*. The maxim: 'No one gets out of here alive' is invoked in the closing lines: 'Let us hope, by some good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.' While never lyrically overt, a palpable spiritual undercurrent is woven into the fabric of *SAY GRACE*. **Arthur Wood**
www.sambakermusic.com

Alice Gerrard BITTERSWEET

Spruce and Maple
Music SMM 1008
★★★★

*A welcome mellow
return for one of the
unsung heroes of bluegrass*

North Carolina resident Alice Gerrard has been a pillar of the bluegrass and American roots music scene for 40 years, inspiring such well-known names as Tim O'Brien, Emmylou Harris, The Judds and even, it is claimed, Bob Dylan. Her crucial



contributions to the genre, often working with Appalachian singer Hazel Dickens, feature on a raft of compilation albums on Folkways and other labels. Produced by Californian singer and fiddler Laurie Lewis, who also provides harmonies, *BITTERSWEET*, is Gerrard's first solo album for ten years, and features such highly acclaimed players as guitarist Bryan Sutton, fiddler Stuart Duncan, string bass player Todd Phillips, mandolin player Tom Rozum and Rob Ickes on Dobro.

The album opens with Gerrard's characteristically husky voice on the a cappella *Lonely Night*, a paean to the solitude that follows a relationship break-up, after which the title track's gentle instrumentation frames a nostalgic meditation on old memories and the passing of time. *Sweet South Anna River* is typical of the storytelling songs in which Gerrard specialises, featuring lilting fiddle and sensitive piano accompaniment from Barbara Higbie. Of the album's tasteful collection of soft bluegrass and traditional country tunes, several songs are worthy of special mention. The lyrically lovely ballad *Tell Me Their Story* pairs fiddle and mandolin, while *Somebody Have Mercy* offers an upbeat bluesy sound, feisty guitar and ironic harmonies, and the lofty, up-tempo *Unexpected Love* could almost be a country radio single.

More serious themes are explored on the laboured *Borderland*, but the swing-inspired, fiddle-led *Payday At The Mill* returns to the light touch of earlier songs by way of some wry, low-pitched guitar picking, and the album closes with *Sun Keep Shining On Me*, an optimistic nod to the future. Although recorded in Nashville, *BITTERSWEET* is a far cry from Music City's commercial churnings, presenting an accessible mix of folk, bluegrass and traditional country while making shrewd life observations through Gerrard's sensitive, succinct and often comic storytelling lyrics. As a newcomer to her work, I must say I am impressed.

Jeremy Isaac

www.heartmusic.com

Trinity River Band TODAY DON'T LOOK LIKE RAIN

Self-released

★★★★

If Christian music



and bluegrass are two things you enjoy, then this is an album that needs to be in your collection immediately

This family band from Callahan, Florida prove themselves to be not only skilled singers and musicians, but also expert at choosing just the right material to suit their talents and spiritual life. Though they specialise in songs with religious undertones, this is much more than just another bluegrass-gospel album. True songs like *When I Come Home, Lord* are steeped in the gospel tradition, but the underlying message in these songs is more about living a wholesome, moralistic life rather than simply following the path of God.

Mike Harris (lead vocals, guitar) his wife Lisa (upright bass, harmony vocals) and their three children—Sarah (lead vocals, mandolin), Joshua (banjo, Dobro, harmony vocals) and young Brianna (lead and harmony vocals)—specialise in the more traditional strains of bluegrass, occasionally drifting into straight country. It is Sarah who emerges as the real 'find'—one of the best 'new' female singers I've heard in some time. From the opening lines of *Today It Don't Look Like Rain* it becomes apparent that she employs her voice with a degree of control and maturity many established stars should envy. Heartbreaking balladry at its finest and acoustic musical accompaniment that is more than just the cream on the top. She is joined by Josh Williams (from Rhonda Vincent & the Rage) for *What Did I Ever Do* a stunning duet that reminds me of those classic Porter & Dolly hits from years ago ... pure magic. In contrast Ernest Tubb's *I Hung My Head And Cried* is given a driving bluegrass treatment that perfectly showcases her limber range and deliciously sassy style of phrasing.

All the family showcase their expert picking skills on Joshua's all-too-brief *Riptide* instrumental run-through whilst Mike demonstrates his distinctive vocal chops on a revival of Pure Prairie League's *Amie* and the Waylon Jennings' hit *Rose In Paradise*. Carl Jackson's *The Farmer's Wife* is tailor made for Sarah's sweetly expressive voice, whilst *The Pain Of Loving You* is simply exquisite. This recommended album serves as a perfect showcase for the Trinity River Band's considerable musical gifts. Can't wait to hear more.

Alan Cackett

www.trinityriverband.com