

...the new releases

and emotionally driven *Days And Days And Nights* on which her voice is again quite superb as it moves with consummate ease between sensual, emotive and fired-up grittiness.

There are plenty more songs that are as powerful as the ones mentioned as well as great toe-tapping tracks such as *Mm Mm Mm Mm* with fine piano from Barry Walsh. Tori has a great voice that is full of passion and fire and this is a very good album that is a mix of Americana, country, jazz and even a touch of gypsy swing. **DK** www.torisparks.com

The Mynabirds
WHAT WE LOSE IN THE FIRE WE GAIN IN THE FLOOD
Saddle Creek
★★★★

Enjoyable through and through...

Fronted by Laura Burhenn, the Mynabirds are a relatively new band and their debut has been well-received. The American singer-songwriter was formerly half of the DC duo and when they broke up she wrote what would become the material for her new band's debut. Working with singer-songwriter and producer Richard Swift, *WHAT WE LOSE IN THE FIRE WE GAIN IN THE FLOOD* was recorded in 2009 in Oregon, and Laura and Richard swapped between instruments until they had a full sounding record. Also featuring many guests for spots on the pedal steel guitar, backing vocals and horns, this record misses nothing. The opener *What We Gained In The Fire* is a strong introduction to their sound and to Laura's wonderful vocals, whilst *Let The Record Go* energises and slips into a comfortable tone that really suits the band. *Wash It Out* is a standout song on the album that really caught my attention for its change in tone and style direction, that could be passed off as a Regina Spektor song crossed with a KT Tunstall voice. Very strange combination indeed but it works so very well as does this entire album. I love her voice and the mix of folk, pop and glances at country, in its entirety this album makes for an enjoyable listening experience. **LB** www.myspace.com/themynabirds

Tim O'Brien
CHICKEN & EGG
Howdy Skies Records
★★★★☆

So which of the two options came first?

O'Brien launches his thirteenth solo album with a song that takes the listener back to the dawn of (biblical) time. The Garden of Eden is the setting for the lyrically humorous hoedown *You Ate The Apple*. Tim co-wrote the latter song with Jonathan Byrd. Other CHICKEN & EGG writing collaborators of the folk persuasion include Johnsmith (*Old Joe*), and some guy called Woody Guthrie (*The Sun Jumped Up*). As for folks known for their country links

Dixie Chick Martie Maguire is his *Mother Mary* collaborator, while John Hadley furnished the assist on *Letter In The Mail* wherein, from America's western shore, the narrator receives a touching letter that makes him all go soft at the centre and closes with 'I love you dad.'

56 years old O'Brien recorded CHICKEN & EGG in four days, the core players being Stuart Duncan (fiddle, mandolin, cello, banjo), Bryan Sutton (acoustic and electric guitar), and bass men Dennis Crouch and Mike Bub. O'Brien contributes vocals throughout and also plays bouzouki, banjo, mandolin, guitar and piano. There are guest vocals from Darrell Scott and Sarah Jarosz, while Ray Bonneville blows some harmonica on the Guthrie co-write.

As with the opening selection, a degree of humour pervades *Gonna Try To Make Her Stay* co-written with Nashville based solo artist Jimmy Stewart, while the lyric to Tim's high-energy *Workin'* furnishes a seemingly endless list of occupations. Phrases that his late father was prone to use compose the lyric to the personal portrait *Not Afraid O' Dyin'*. Relatively speaking CHICKEN & EGG includes a cover of *Sinner* penned by Darrell Scott's dad Wayne. Part travelogue and part exposition of the seasons, Lucas Reynolds (*Blue Merle*) helped O'Brien with *Space Between The Lines* and it closes the album. Featuring lyrics that survey every facet of life, melodically CHICKEN & EGG amounts to a marriage of vastly varying tempos that draws on folk, country and bluegrass influences. **ArthurW** <http://timobrien.net/>

Shake Russell
WHAT THIS HEART HOLDS
Shake Russell Music
★★★★☆

Shake Russell's WHAT THIS HEART HOLDS is a vocal harmony rich delight

Texas music veteran Shake Russell (acoustic guitar, vocals) has been touring in recent years with Doug Floyd (mandolin, backing vocals) and Mike Roberts (acoustic bass, backing vocals). The trio's speciality—mighty fine, three part harmonies—recently scored them the Vocal Group of the Year Award in the 8th annual Texas Music Awards. On their latest release they're mainly assisted by album producer John Inmon (acoustic and electric guitar, bass, keyboard, percussion), Greg Lowrey (Irish whistle, keyboards, accordion, percussion) and Rick Richards (drums).

Russell's writing collaborators include regulars such as poet Charles John Quatro, Michael Hearne and Chuck Hamrick, while, with one co-write each, having avidly followed Russell's career for over two decades, Willie Atkinson, Toni Becker, Susie Warley and Danny Everitt are new names to this writer. It appears that Everitt was nominated for Texas Singer/Songwriter of the Year Award three years running (2007-2009). Oh yes, and *Anam Cara (My Soul Friend)* is credited to Russell and Inmon. Shake

Punch Brothers
ANTIFOGMATIC
Nonesuch
★★★★

Chris Thile and friends showcase their prodigious talents in bite-size chunks

Never shy in showing-off his virtuosity as a songwriter or musician, former Nickel Creek front man Chris Thile has another notable release under his belt. This second record from his new quintet the Punch Brothers is in a way rather closer to his old band than their first effort. While *THE BLIND LEAVING THE BLIND* took bluegrass instrumentation to its extreme in the form of a four-movement classical composition, *ANTIFOGMATIC* is much more digestible to the 'modern listener', being clearly focussed on songs.

But, just because there are songs, don't think there's anything too simple about them. The combined musical brain waves of Thile (on vocals and mandolin), Chris Eldridge (guitar), Noam Pikelny (banjo), Gabe Witcher (fiddle) and Paul Kowert (bass) are off the Richter scale. Notes buzz like a bee in a jar, scales leap from high to low like a crazed man on a cliff top, and a visceral drama exudes from every playful flourish. Thile's vocals are also a real delight: switching from fragile to viscous in a bar on the wonderful *Alex*, and taking on a Thom Yorke style moodiness on the clever *Me and Us*. Plus, there's even a concession to old-fashioned bluegrass lovers with the rollicking *Rye Whiskey* and the swinging *Next to the Trash*. **HK** www.punchbrothers.com



penned three of the thirteen songs on his own including the amiable album title song, which launches the disc, and *Vanished*, the tale of a lover who has gone away. The latter features Inmon's trademark muted electric guitar sound as well as a short but subtle solo.

As for the subjective focus of Shake's lyrics there have consistently been two main categories—the Texas and South-West landscape, and songs about romance or women. In that regard the contents of *WHAT THIS HEART HOLDS* more than satisfy. *Places In Texas*, a two-step, which name-checks the legendary Hill On The Moon ranch, Saturday night gigs in Austin and the Guadalupe River is most definitely one of the former, while the other variety offers an almost album-wide choice. Standout selections include the bittersweet *Ruby* and the New Mexico travelogue *Red Willow Way*, (both written with Michael Hearne), while an uncredited female duets with Shake on the penultimate *The Bird And The Stone*. Written with New Hampshire born, Texas based singer-songwriter Susie Warley—maybe it's the voice of his collaborator? **AW** <http://www.shakerussell.com/>

Sad Iron Music
SAD IRON MUSIC
Self-released
★★★★

A terrific return from a man who should be a household name!

Jason T. Lewis has the perfect voice for singing alternative country. I'm not quite sure exactly what I mean by that, but his vocals just feel right, in much the same way as the likes of Jay Farrar, Ryan Adams, Gary Louris, etc. His former band, the much vaunted by No Depression magazine, Star City produced much but tantalisingly only made two albums and delivered on quality but not on longevity. Even nearly a decade later, those two albums still compare well to just about anything else around and should really be on many Classic albums lists. Maybe it's not too late, as they are still available from a few internet sources. Jason made one more album with the late Jay Bennett and then disappeared from the music business for many years. So how does



his 'comeback' album measure up? I'm pleased to say, astonishingly well!

An album generally of songs about love and life's ups and downs. The love songs are incredibly tender, even the tales of lost love, but the overall impression, despite some of the drama, is of love found and regardless of the feeling that it may not be permanent it is still worth trying to hold on to. Overall, realism rather than the illusion of any great optimism or expectations. Maybe he is saying that disappointment is easier to cope with than hope. It feels almost like a slightly veiled opening up of deeper feelings!

The songs are understated, when compared to Star City, and cleverly written, but with an edginess rather than any blandness. There are plenty of chiming guitars with tasteful use of steel and always that voice that seems to give a view into his soul. Even on the slower, mellow songs there is always something going on, though not always definable. Maybe it is just the atmosphere that is created because of his talent for writing and melody! There is the slow, moody love song of *Ships On The Sea*, the beautiful accordion driven *Tom Waits For No One*, a scary tale of modern life in *Red Light* and even the Star City-sounding *Outta My Heart*. He is ably assisted by a group of friends who are all accomplished musicians, as well as his wife Theresa on keyboards. Whilst I will probably always love the Star City albums, this is still an excellent return from a highly talented musician and songwriter. **MikeM** www.sadironmusic.com

Sarah McClurg
ALL THE SMALL THINGS
Bluesoap Music
★★★★

A great mini-album from a very talented singer-songwriter

The powerful voice of Sarah McClurg is shown to its full potential on this mini-album as she belts out songs *Tennessee Rain*, *One Soul* and *Neverland*. Each deep and meaningful song tells a different story; *Neverland* being a tale of love and deceit where there is no fairytale ending and *Tennessee Rain* being an up-beat, love song.

