

certainly not evident when hearing his self-titled debut album

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

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

**Natalia Zukerman**  
**BRAND NEW FRAME**  
Weasel Records  
★★★★

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

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

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

**Nelson Brothers**  
**PLACES IN THE HEART**  
nbmp003  
★★★★

Roots and a whole lot more

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

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



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

Well put together collection combines classic country with modern vibe

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

A smorgasbord of gospel, country and bluegrass songs

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

Performed a cappella Harrington





## ...the new releases

opens with the redemptive *Untitled* from her 2007 debut *THE BOOTLEGGERS DAUGHTER*. Accompanied by Zak Borden (mandolin, guitar and vocals), she moves on with *Shoeless Joe*, her tale of (the still) disgraced early 20<sup>th</sup> century baseball star. *Shoeless Joe* Jackson was one of the 'cornfield' players in Kevin Costner's movie *Field Of Dreams*. Borden takes the lead vocal on the traditional bluegrass number *The Girl I Left In Sunny Tennessee* and Rachel Lyn adds the responses. Laura Viers' *Up The River* is followed by *I Don't Want To Get Adjusted To The World* a traditional gospel number, that surfaced on Harrington's September 2008 sophomore release *CITY OF REFUGE*.

Patsy Cline took *Walking After Midnight* to number two on the country chart over half a century ago, and sass and swing underpin Rachel's reading. Following her edgy circus tale *Under The Big Top*, Harrington delivers a gut-busting rendition of Bobbie Gentry's 1967 pop-country crossover *Ode To Billy Joe*. The pair close this disc—encore actually—with the old chain gang song *Some Old Day* on which Zak leads, followed by a sympathetic rendition of *Goodbye*, Steve Earle's tale of love lost that surfaced on his 1995 *TRAIN A COMIN'* comeback album.

Whether traditional, contemporary cover or one of Rachel's own compositions, her vocal interpretations merge seamlessly. Featuring album and non-album material, *IN THE WOODS*, is a what-you-hear-is-what-you-get in concert synopsis of Messrs. Harrington and Borden. **AW**  
<http://www.rachelharrington.net/home.html>  
<http://www.myspace.com/rachelharrington>

**Rachel McShane**  
**NO MAN'S FOOL**  
Navigator Records  
★★★★

Excellent solo release from the sole female

member of *Bellowhead* is an eclectic mix of styles within the folk, jazz and dare I say it, funk genres

When this release fell through the letterbox I thought it was going to be purely and simply a folk album. Wrong! *NO MAN'S FOOL* is a superb collection of yes, traditional songs but delivered with at times a jazz-infused beat—quite different. The theme of the album is tales of many men, ranging from kind-hearted, well-meaning gentlemen to thieves, mysterious strangers and somewhat sinister characters. As they say though, behind every man is a shrewd and audacious woman who always shines through.

Opening track is the accordion-led *Captain Ward*, a traditional song but given a modern twist. The Rachel McShane band consists of James Peacock on keyboards, bassist Jonathan Proud and on drums and percussion Adam Sinclair—musicians whose backgrounds are more rooted in jazz and soul than folk and it

certainly shows. My Johnny Was A Shoemaker is a traditional tale but given the full soul and funk workout here, the Hammond B3 to the fore, it perhaps shouldn't work, but it does. Many will know of Rachael as being the cello and fiddle player with folk super-group *Bellowhead* and also as being one of the eight musicians involved in the Darwin Music Project and it's this eclectic musical career that has helped form this fine release. Apart from being a superb cellist and fiddle player, Rachel also has a beautiful voice and this is shown well on *Maid On The Shore*, a track that has a full-blown jazz backing complete with honking horn section. All in all, a great debut solo release, not what you would initially expect but well worth opening your ears to. **JC**  
[www.myspace.com/rachelmshane](http://www.myspace.com/rachelmshane)

**Spring Creek**  
**WAY UP ON A MOUNTAIN**  
Rebel Records-REBCD1832  
★★★★★

Colorado based bluegrass outfit shine brightly on this enjoyably entertaining album

Spring Creek have emerged as one of the top new bands on the Rocky Mountain bluegrass scene, and the foursome are all top singers as well as master musicians. The band consists of Chris Elliott (banjo), Jessica Smith (upright bass), Taylor Sims (guitar) and Alex Johnstone (mandolin, fiddle).

Tracks like the pulsating *My Love Is Way Up On A Mountain* with a solid vocal delivery from Taylor, and *Another Lonesome Night My Dear* with Jessica taking lead vocals accompanied by fine banjo and mandolin from Chris and Alex respectively, are great examples of the pure bluegrass sound performed by this excellent group. The superb instrumental *Cuba Vera Swing* which shows their brilliant picking abilities along with the fun *Drivin' Me Crazy* with great vocals from Taylor both prove that they can also play tremendous western swing music. Then on tracks such as the deliciously gorgeous ballad *Lonesome Train* they show how good they are at singing the most exquisite harmonies, with Chris taking the main lead and being complimented by Taylor and Jessica's sweet vocal accompaniment... heavenly. This is Spring Creek's debut album on Rebel Records and it's an odds-on winner! **DK**  
[www.springcreekbluegrassband.com](http://www.springcreekbluegrassband.com)

**PG & Frank**  
**CHASING THE WIND**  
Steel Mountain Records  
707141000398  
★★★★☆

The duo's fourth album is a collection of perfectly palatable American country-rock

I guess when John Bland of the Flying Burrito Brothers meets you in a church (albeit on a pre-arranged TV broadcast) you might begin to



**Nick Wyke and Becki Driscoll**  
**BENEATH THE BLACK TREE**  
Englishfiddle CD02

★★★★

Music presented as music with no gimmicks or showiness

Sometimes you get an actor who you like to watch in a film but who you never quite believe in the role but they are so enjoyable to watch that you carry on. This duo are the opposite of that. Devon duo Nick Wyke and Becki Driscoll combine a love of traditional folk with their own arrangements and self-penned numbers. Community musicians, buskers, composers and teachers, they are thoroughbred folkies. And because of this, listening to *BENEATH THE BLACK TREE* is hardcore. Nick Wyke is really no singer but he does justice to the relentless and unyielding music by having no ego. His singing is bombastic and one-tone and occasionally slightly out of tune but because this is Proper English Folk it's not really about the artists.

The songs are sparse and Nymanesque in their loquacious but there is a nice mix of ballad and dance, horn and harmonium. Eight of the ten tracks are traditional with a couple of original compositions, *Flying Fishes* and *The Antimacassar*, but these slot in nicely with the selection of old numbers. Apart from these, there are NO concessions to modern times, no unwelcome jazz influence and a heavy implication of 16<sup>th</sup> century gavotters. I like it. A lot. **HD**  
<http://www.englishfiddle.com/>



wonder about the power of divine intervention. Well that's pretty much what happened to Norwegian country duo PG & Frank (aka PG Stølen and Frank R Fjellvang.) Hardly new to the game, these fellas have been playing together in the same band for years. In 1986 they founded the band P.G. Stølen and the Riders of Good News and recorded their first album *PROMISED LAND* in 1990.

This album was recorded in Brenham, Texas and features Bland as both producer and contributor on guitar, mandolin and keyboards. On the sleeve note Bland passes comment that the voices of PG & Frank: 'wrap around you like a warm blanket.' I have to say, I can hardly disagree; sample *I Know Everything*. Not entirely sure where they are going with the foot-tapping saxophone backed *Royal Bengal Indian* or for that matter *God Change The End* (well actually, I probably do!). For the most part though you could easily be in the deepest pedal steel region of Scand-America, 'Driving the old Ford with the canoe on the roof'. If you take your country-rock with a touch of religious fervour, then have a listen to *Hymn*, it's actually a gorgeous song, if you like that sort of thing? *Up North Of Norway* takes you galloping into the wilderness of Scandinavia's wild (North) west. The production is faultless and at times almost too polished. However, this does not detract from the talent and warmth on offer here. Tracks to look out for are, *Living On Dreams* and the evocative *Train To Vos*. **AJT**  
[www.myspace.com/pgfrankmusic](http://www.myspace.com/pgfrankmusic)

**Sam Carter**  
**KEEPSAKES**  
Captain Records  
★★★★

In late April 2008 East Midlands bred, North London based Sam Carter self-released the five-song *HERE IN THE GROUND EP*. The ten-song *KEEPSAKES* is his debut full album, and Sam's arrangement of the traditional *Oh Dear, Rue The Day* is the only non-original song on the disc. Let's focus on the latter track for a moment. One of the aspects of English traditional folk song performance that I find utterly irritating is the vocal intonation and strangulation of our language relative to the manner in which it is spoken. On the slow paced aforementioned



trad. arr. cut, Carter narrowly avoids putting his foot square in that trap. The acoustic guitar, bass and percussion intro to *Pheasant* hint at a Nick Drake influence, the use of strings on *Captain*—subjectively a road (manager's) song—is suitable pastoral and English, while based around the repeated 'Somebody suffered and that's not right' the recently redundant narrator in *Hired Hands* carps at the bosses who kept their jobs.

Carter's skill with wood and steel is undeniable, and his finger-picked compositions attest to a firm grasp of melodic structure—*Station Road* and *Taxi* are standouts. As for his lyrics, though pleasant enough, none left me floored by a stream of clever poetic couplets or an intriguing storyline that warranted repeated hearing. Maybe on the next go-round? **AW**  
<http://www.samcartermusic.co.uk/>  
<http://www.myspace.com/samjohnccarter>

**Rugfire**  
**THE BLAMVANIA SESSIONS**  
Dental Records  
R738  
★★★★

Excellent debut from a group of well-travelled and well worn Welsh alt-rockers

In the nicest possible way *Rugfire* are made up of five journeyman Welsh musicians, who have played with and supported nearly every Division 2 Americana and alt-country band you've heard of in the last 15 years or so. Marriages and mortgages have brought them together in South Wales and the music industry will be all the better for that quirk of fate. Every song is well crafted and just the right side of 'slick' with a production that wouldn't be out of place coming from a major label.

*Great Plains* reads like typical American fayre but is sung with enough passion and grit to make the listener dream of mountains, seas and New Orleans slipping into the ocean. *Bass Player* is a jaunty pop song presumably written by a bass player who saves the world with his 'four chunky strings and a long guitar'. *Rugfire* do 'moody' and 'atmospheric' extremely well; with both *Matches* and *Road Safety* standing high among a plethora of other strong songs.

Highlight and hit single (in more

