

Overmountain Men

THE NEXT BEST THING

Ramseur Records

★★★★★

A diamond of a genre-straddling record

Reviewing albums is akin to buying three bottles of wine for £10 in a supermarket. Without fail, the wine will be palatable and occasionally you will open a bottle with a non-descript label, and during the first sip, know you've discovered something very special indeed. You then have a dilemma; do you keep it a secret or do you scream it from the rooftops? The Overmountain Men are just that bottle of wine and they will, for now, remain our little secret.

The band revolves around Bob Crawford (bass player to the Avett Brothers) and singer David Childers, plus a host of musicians from the Carolinas, with THE NEXT BEST THING being their second album; and it opens with the breathtaking All Out Of Diamonds, which is a playful way of describing a man's failed marriage and



refusal to commit to another woman. David Childers' soulful voice sounds like well-worn Spanish leather and the rootsy backing had me sitting back in my chair, desperate to hear more.

This is immediately followed by a talking blues history lesson, Halls Of Glory about Teddy Roosevelt, that will remind you more than a little of Burl Ives in its delivery; I can't praise it high enough. We get another history lesson with the delightful, piano and fiddle-accompanied Alexander Hamilton—one of America's apparent founding Fathers, which has a hook and a chorus that will stick in your mind for a long, long time: 'It's a short life and I'll not pretend it's not easy being me,' which I want printed on a t-shirt.

There isn't one poor song anywhere on the album; but the one that I find I keep returning to is Death Is So Romantic, which has a cool banjo accompaniment and is about the carefree swagger that young people have. It will strike a chord with those of us who either have teenagers or came out the other side of such a lifestyle. Poison Cookies merges folk-styled singing with

bluegrass banjo and some pretty funky blues harmonica, to create a modern song that sounds very traditional.

THE NEXT BEST THING is the very embodiment of Americana and probably roots and folk music, with nods in the direction of Willie Nelson, Gordon Lightfoot, Otis Gibbs and, of course Burl Ives. It comes highly praised. **Alan Harrison**

www.overmountainmen.com

Jeff Black B-SIDES AND CONFESSIONS, VOLUME TWO

Lotos Nile Music

★★★★★

Another mighty fine Jeff Black song collection

Following a liner artwork divergence into shades of green and olive on his late 2011 outing PLOW THROUGH THE MYSTIC, Jeff's comfortably back in the black and white, in terms of the photography that graces this new release. Nashville-based Black's four solo recordings from BIRMINGHAM ROAD (1998) through to TIN LILY (2005) leant



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heavily upon the use of monochromatic photographs.

The lyric to rhythmically insistent, cautionary album opener *All Right Now* relates how Black took 'a trip up to Killer City, a little town where I was born'—aka Kansas City, Missouri, and moving on he adds: 'I saw what a life there might have give me, I turned around and high tailed home.' This collection continues with the gentle, melodic waltz *Molly Rose*, narrated by 'just a boy,' who is enamoured by a mature, beautiful and unattainable woman—'The first time I seen her she was waltzing through town.' When the woman is wronged by 'a scab of a man,' the youngster, quaking in his boots, decides to mete out justice. The deed accomplished, the boy muses: 'he should have never mistaken my fear for goodwill' and harbouring no regrets, he adds: 'I hope the blade that I buried in his belly still burns.'

The cautionary *Impala* portrays a group of teenage freshmen and their hero worship of a seemingly mature yet 'haywire crazy 21-year-old, that 'drove a stock car down in Texas under a secret name.' That's what he claimed! Then came that fateful April fool's night when, drunk on whiskey, he got behind the wheel of a Chevrolet Impala. Born in Oklahoma, aged 17 Alice Carry journeys to California in the hope of breaking into the movies. Instead of fame and fortune, she finds 'her Henry' and 'somewhere between the mountains and the bay we raised a family.' *Miss Me* is a bittersweet love ode; Sam Bush's energetic fiddle playing helps propel *An Evil Lesson Is Soon Learned*, while the ensuing *Good Old Days* is a gentler affair. *VOLUME TWO* softly meanders to a close with *Sunday Falling*, wherein the narrator concludes: 'We can make this last forever.'

Recorded at the same time as *PLOW THROUGH THE MYSTIC*, Jeff (vocals, guitars, banjo, bass, piano, keyboards, harmonica, programming, percussion) is principally aided on the twelve-song *VOLUME TWO* by Sam Bush (mandolin, fiddle) and Jerry Douglas (resonator guitar, lap steel); while Kenny Wright (drums, percussion) features on *Avalon*; as do the voices of Gretchen Peters and Matraca Berg. In addition to the foregoing, Scott Evans (bass) contributes to *Molly Rose* and Alice Carry. Black excels as a songwriter when relating a discernible storyline, and there are some mighty fine examples here. **Arthur Wood**

www.jeffblack.com/index.html

Burns & Kristy CARAVAN

Self-released

★★★★★

Hauntingly beautiful debut from skilled and seasoned Americana duo

Terry Burns (vocalist) and Ron Kristy (instrumentalist) have been playing and writing music professionally and separately for over 25 years. Terry sang with her four other female siblings in a folk-rock outfit called (unsurprisingly) *The Burns Sisters*. They appeared in the film *Atlantic City* and released a moderately successful album for Columbia in 1986 called *ENDANGERED SPECIES*. After three albums, Terry and one of her older sisters, Sheila, left the band. Terry then became a staff writer successively for three large music corporations. Ron has been a film and TV music composer during this same period. His compositions can be heard in documentaries across a wide range of subject fields on US television. His skills with guitar, bass, percussion and keyboards are keenly displayed on *CARAVAN*.

The two have now teamed up to make one of the most entrancingly beautiful and timeless set of songs to grace a debut album in many a year. The title track is one of the few to feature Ron as lead vocalist and is a harmony-laden pastoral love song with rippling arpeggio-filled guitar and echoing ephemeral support vocals from Terry—a very hypnotic sound and deserving of its title track status. The lyrics, written by Kristy, begin with an appeal to step out of the chaos of life for a while: 'This life is sacred, every step, every heartbeat, every breath. Leave life with no regrets. Come join the caravan of love.' A sense of gentle mysticism pervades much of this beautifully textured album.

Lyrics play a strong part in Burns and Kristy's music and they have selected a stellar group of songwriters, past and present, to provide material for *CARAVAN*. As well as songs written or co-written by their friends and fellow musicians, Pam Rose and Cathy Majeski, there are pieces by Kim Richey, Julie Miller, Betsy Rose and the legendary 1970s artist and composer, Lesley Duncan. Lesley's *Love Song*, recorded by a wide range of artists over the years, is given a thoughtful and crystal-clear interpretation by Terry. There is not a lightweight track on this album, but two



stand out with especial vividness. The jaunty *Runaway Train*, co-written by Terry and Kim Richey, has a lively chorus that has the feel of a train hurtling along the tracks. The song that closes the album is the beautiful Betsy Rose number *Standing Like A Tree* and has the madrigal quality that Pentangle once produced on their seminal *BASKET OF LIGHT* album in the late 1960s.

CARAVAN is a beautifully crafted album from two performers at ease with their subject matter and with their abundant ability to produce sweet and tender sounds that will travel, as caravans do, successfully from place to place and seamlessly down the years. Simon Beards

www.burnsandkristy.com

Quiet Loner GREEDY MAGICIANS

Little Red Rabbit

Records: LRR034

★★★★★

Possibly the most important record of the year

This is Manchester-based singer-songwriter Matt Hill's third album and when I slid the disc into the player, I was knocked sideways by the opening song, *Days Of Surveillance* as it is a raw and rye observation of the world we live in, and Hill peels all the layers of our lives back until you listen, intently to every single word and phrase he uses, and nod in meek agreement. The *Ghost Of Oswald Mosley* just might be the finest observational song I've ever heard, as Hill chooses to have the racist that inhabits the song eating a samosa, which is the irony that I see in every idiot I've ever encountered in an Indian or Chinese take-away on a Friday night. The song goes on to list the subtle ways that institutional racism has crept into our lives without us realising it—it's a very sad thing to have pointed out.

The *Captain's Diseased* takes a traditional British folk template and twists it into a modern sea-shanty using the *Captain of a ship heading for the rocks* as a metaphor for our Prime Minister (pure genius?). The title track, *Greedy Magicians*, is a delightful tune that compares magicians to...well, let me just say that this song casts a shadow over many countries, as we head ever deeper into recession. Every track is interspersed with polite applause as the album was recorded in a Church, before

