

NEW RELEASES

Dave McGraw & Mandy Fer SEED OF A PINE

Independent:
BADGE008

★★★☆

Comfortable
Americana on duo
debut that doesn't quite gel

There's something that isn't quite right about this album from a pair of American singer-songwriters. Separately they've both spent a fair few years going up and down the highways and byways of America, but this is their duo debut and it doesn't quite gel. Less than the sum of its parts, you might say.

McGraw is the larger presence, and he majors in wide open landscapes and those who inhabit them. His vivid vignettes work well, and when he turns it up a bit, as with the beefier, dirtier backbeat on *Serotiny* (May Our Music) that's good too. He also has a classic Americana voice which he uses to fine effect on the likes of opener *So Comes The Day and Comin' Down*. Fer's songs are more personal, more intense love songs. Unfortunately they're also weaker; songs to be admired rather than moved by.

All of this is hardly damning though, so what's the problem? It's that Fer's voice doesn't work too well with McGraw's, even when it's in the background. It's that the warm, intimate feel producer Zach Goheen has given the album doesn't really suit McGraw's songs. Mostly it's the sense that the album is just a bit too pleasant, a bit too keen on its comfort zone, and consequently doesn't really stand out from the crowd.

In the interests of fairness one should note that a number of other writers have, if not raved, certainly enthused about *SEED OF A PINE*, but for this reviewer it doesn't really work, and every time it was listened to, the wish for a solo McGraw album produced by Steve Earle was never far away. **Jeremy Searle**

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David Mallett GREENIN' UP

North Road Records

★★★★

Tending the land
forms the subjective
focus of this partial
retrospective

The latest musical epistle from Mainer



David Mallett has been released in conjunction with the Maine Farmland Trust and finds the musician, principally, revisiting material from his back pages; the subjective focus: the natural world and tending the land. I said principally, since *Fat Of The Land*, *Dogs & Horses* and album closer *Beautiful Rose* are new creations. The first of the foregoing trio relates that 'Henry put in a bottom mile of beans' and 'He hoed and he hoed and watched them turn green.' In a subsequent verse, David temporarily diverts the focus with: 'Stop that fightin' quit them wars, get down to doin' what we come here for.' A travelling musician narrates the almost five minute-long, melodically insistent *Dogs & Horses*, while *Beautiful Rose* possesses a spiritual edge.

Taken from David's 1978 self-titled debut, *GREENIN' UP* opens with *I Knew This Place*, wherein an older person reflects upon his growing years, and muses: 'These tired legs I'm standing on, would scarcely dare to leave the spot upon which they're standing.' David was aged 27 when he penned the foregoing title, and it's followed by the farming and fishing-themed album title song which originally appeared on his 1999 Flying Fish Records collection *AMBITION*. No Mallett career retrospective would be complete without inclusion of his classic *Garden Song*. It first appeared on his debut album and again on *PARALLEL LIVES* (1997). The song has been covered by countless artists including Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie, the late John Denver and the Muppets. Translated and recorded in many languages, the song also inspired the children's book, *Inch By Inch*, published by Harper Collins.

Northern Lights made its public debut on *OPEN DOORS & WINDOWS* (1983). A paean to the dancing lights in the northern night sky, on this go-round the song bears the title *Aurora Borealis*. Sitting on the bank of a stream 'in the shade of this old tree,' a man, now mature in years, narrates the waltz-paced *Summer Of My Dreams*. Fishing is as vital part of the Maine economy as farming, and, as in *Greenin' Up*, both occupations are referenced in Mallett's early career creation *Arrowsic*. From David's album *VITAL SIGNS* (1986) there's the optimistic pairing of *Good Times* and *April*. Seasonally-tinged, *April* finds Mallett anticipate as well as reflect upon the seasons: '...she's a quicker dance, with a forward gaze and a backward glance.' Mallett's first three albums were released by Paul Noel Stookey's label,

Newworld Records, and from his sophomore set *PENNSYLVANIA SUNRISE* (1979) the annual harvest takes centre stage in *The Haying Song*. **Arthur Wood**

www.davidmallett.com

Kevin Deal THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Blindfellow Records

★★★★☆

There's no need for
creative metaphor
here, all you need to know is that this is a
damn, fine album

Texan Kevin Deal is a true working-man country singer. For several years he put his musical dreams on the back-burner as he worked as a stone mason to feed his family. During that time he released the occasional album, each one full of classic country songs in the time-honoured tradition of reflecting real life people and experiences. This latest one takes him into country-gospel territory, but still deeply rooted in the everyday, working-man scheme of things. Deal is particularly expressive with his rich, earthy vocals on the well-balanced assemblage of up-tempo and ballad material. His vocal tone screams of Billy Joe Shaver and has a mature, rootsy vibe to it that suits his well-written songs with their religious undertones. The simple guitar, Dobro, harmonica and sparse percussion on *When Your Name Is Called* allow the combination of his lyrical depth and vocal tone to create an emotional and uplifting song. A great story-teller, on *Gideon* he shows that you can write a great yarn and blend it with a great melody very much in the Tom T Hall style of old. He whips out his harmonica for *I Need Revival*, a fantastic number about his temptation to stray off the straight and narrow with Lloyd Maines driving the rhythm with banjo and Dobro supported by Miles Penhall's acoustic guitar and Samantha Deal's mandolin. Terri Hendrix adds harmonies to the pounding *Big Prayer*, an insistent gospel number that really gets under the skin. That's followed by *Amazing Grace* as you've never heard it before. Deal's rough-hewn, exquisite country vocals and acoustic guitar work bring a highly personal and moving touch to this much over-recorded song. I might not be religious, but that didn't stop me loving this album from beginning to end.

Alan Cackett

www.kevindeal.com

