

blender and pureed until ready. What we find being presented to us are these classic rock and roll elements but a simple country sound which could be played on a front porch quite easily. This is a track that is not held back by technology, leading to presumptions that even if the electricity cut out at one of their gigs Mr Plow could play this unaided with ease due to its simplicity but general beauty. Telling of a man who killed his family, sent to jail and then committed suicide, *Poor John Alexander* acts as a more sinister *Folsom Prison Blues* which, at times, can be quite petrifying as Mr Plow sounds like a guy you don't want to cross with when he's angry. Judging only by his voice, it is still quite a sound which he creates that gets better with each listen.

Demonstrating that this guy is not one to hear when you need cheering up, this album is for those who like their music just that bit more serious and provocative than the rest. Like the greats of songwriting, it is the lyrics which you must concentrate on. When you enter the world of Mr Plow, it seems almost impossible to leave. **RH**  
www.mrplowspplace.co.uk  
www.myspace.com/mrplowspplace

## OysterBand THE OXFORD GIRLS AND OTHER STORIES

Running Man  
Records RMCD6  
★★★★

*Pearl Anniversary set which re-interprets old favourites*

It is hard to believe that it is over 30 years since OysterBand burst onto the folk scene. The combination of anger and righteous indignation coupled with great musical talent and songwriting blew through the dusty cobwebs of a moribund folk scene in the same way that Bellowhead, Eliza Carthy and Seth Lakeman did just a few years ago. The OysterBand weren't a folk band playing rock, they were a rock band playing folk. So now with the release of the current album it all turns full circle. Unlike many other bands who are content to pump out a new selection of Greatest Hits at every available anniversary, Oysterband

have taken the opportunity and care to look back over an impressive back catalogue and cherry-pick a selection of songs which, whilst still showing the band's energy and strength, have been re-imagined in an acoustic setting. Does it work? Mostly yes, although I have to confess that while I do own a few OysterBand CDs I am not overly familiar with the entire back catalogue. So judging it from this point of view, without the hint of nostalgia for past favourites, I have to conclude that it is a very fine album indeed. As you would expect, the playing is exemplary and the acoustic setting allows the vocals and harmonies much more scope to impress. Some of the track such as *When I'm Up I Can't Get Down* and the *Oxford Girl* really shine out in this airier setting. The sleeve notes hint that this is the way the band are heading which, personally, I think is a shame as it is the rocking dance tunes of songs like *Granite Years* that pulled me to the band in the first place. A very nice anniversary one-off but time to get back to the day job. **KM**

## Peter Mulvey LETTERS FROM A FLYING MACHINE

Signature Sounds  
Recordings  
★★★★

*A new chapter in this talented singer-songwriter's recording career*

Looking back now, Notes From Elsewhere the 2007 voice and acoustic guitar reprise of previously recorded songs—1991 through 2005—appears to have closed a chapter in this Wisconsin bred performer's musical career. For a number of years and occasions Peter's studio albums had been produced by David Goodrich, while the credit for this latest album reads, produced by Peter Mulvey and David Chalfant (the Nields, Erin McKeown, the Winterpills). By way of explaining the album title, the cover artwork offers much insight. On the front cover painting Peter is portrayed sat on a plane composing a missive by candlelight. Out beyond the fuselage window and the plane's wing, a fingernail moon hangs in the heavens. Aware of his personal



carbon footprint, in recent years Mulvey has scheduled his Stateside tour dates such that he travelled from venue to venue by bicycle. On the rear cover painting, by the light of the (same?) fingernail moon Peter rides his bicycle over a rise as an airplane passes overhead. The foregoing commentary should go some way to explaining Mulvey's lyrics which touch upon mankind's evolution, the contradictions of life, as well as raising valid questions about the continued existence of our species.

Onstage, between songs, Mulvey often regales audiences with amusing or poignant stories and on this album he features four spoken narratives—life lessons offered or learned—each addressed to a young nephew and niece. Of the latter quartet, *Vlad The Astrophysicist* is the parable that defines this collection. The goodtime sounding album opener *Kids In The Square* poetically alludes to folk with their 'heads in the sand' while planet Earth spins wounded and disintegrating. *Some People* furnishes an amusing commentary on lifestyle choices—discreet and indiscreet. Supported by a funky backbeat *Dynamite Bill* references the 2003 abduction of a child by his non-custodial mother, *Shoulderbirds (You Know Me)* is a lyrically dreamy waltz, while the joyously up-tempo penultimate offering *On A Wing And A Prayer* neatly wraps up this song cycle.

Mulvey's husky baritone and dextrous finger-picked acoustic guitar are forefront on this collection, supported, on occasions, by subtle touches of percussion, accordion, mandolin, restrained electric guitar and strings. In truth Mulvey's songs and narratives constitute a thought provoking journey wherein he ultimately concludes that, while everything crumbles in time, love remains. It's appropriate therefore that, the album closes with a short rendition of Ira and George Gershwin's *Love Is Here To Stay*. **AW**  
http://www.petermulvey.com/  
http://www.myspace.com/petermulvey

## Polly and the Billets DOUX FICTION, HALF TRUTHS AND DOWNRIGHT LIES

Bleakmouse Records BML005  
★★★★

*A debut album so diverse in musical*

*genres it will make the listener have to sit up and pin their ears back*

If you stumbled on Polly and the Billets Doux at either of their Glastonbury gigs or as a support band in a decent venue I'm pretty sure that you would enjoy the experience; but I'm not convinced that you'd rush out to buy this debut album. The country-rock opening track *Follow My Feet* falsely lulls you into thinking you are in for a treat with a mix of KT Tunstall/Sandi Thom vocals nicely layered over some funky guitar playing; but the rest of the tracks are a mish-mash of faux jazz in the Norah Jones mould or folk-rock that is stuck in a 1970s time warp.

The musicianship is very good throughout and Polly Perry has a nice voice as has Andrew Steen who takes lead on a couple of songs and harmonises on *I Would Ask*; but their choice of tracks leaves a lot to be desired and only hints at what they are capable of. For once in my life I have to criticise the production for being too 'slick'; as a couple of songs may have benefited from having a few rough edges instead of the crystal clear sound that becomes boring after a while. There is absolutely nothing to dislike here but there's also nothing very memorable either. File under: Supper jazz. **AH**  
www.pollyandthebilletsdoux.co.uk

## Rob Blackledge INSIDE THESE WALLS

One Revolution  
Entertainment  
★★★★

*Melodically ok, but uninspiring lyrics*

Like Nathan Lee whose RISK EVERYTHING album I reviewed recently, twenty-something Blackledge is signed to Nashville based One Revolution Entertainment, a venture founded by Dean Miller, the late Roger Miller's son, and Iris Thompson. Blackledge hails from near Jackson, Mississippi, and midway through his teens his love of baseball—college and major league



## Gene Watson A TASTE OF THE TRUTH

Shanachie 6207  
★★★★☆

*Watson's smooth voice proves the perfect vehicle for a terrific collection of traditional country*

With a relaxed yet soulful voice, perfectly suited to his impeccable choice of traditional-styled country songs, Gene Watson's new CD is a smooth blend of intimate love ballads, break-up songs and pained heartbreakers delivered with fitting and understated polish. CD-opener *Speakin' of the Angel* with caressing fiddle and steel and engaging hook, plays to Watson's strengths as a singer, while the final tune, *I Know An Ending* with its more insistent rhythm and gorgeous fiddle fills, simply leaves you wanting more. The title track, penned by the underrated Rebecca Lynn Howard,

illuminates the controlled, passionate vocal performances that set this CD apart, while flaunting some crying pedal steel flourishes by Sonny Garrish to make a grown man weep. *We've Got A Pulse* assumes a more upbeat, energetic vibe, and stands out as edgy as Watson extols about the virtues of genuine country music and is joined by the deep-voiced Trace Adkins.

Gene Watson is a veteran country singer who refuses to give up on his passion for music; a sense of purpose that has formed his entire life. His sure sense of purpose is aided by a keen attention to detail, reflected in the studio band's sparkling accompaniment and the evocative arrangements that render this album both contemporary and timeless in scope. Examples abound but none better than *Til A Better Memory Comes Along*, with an astute acoustic production on which the guitars are crisp and clean with nice clarity. Or how about *Staying Together*, a traditional-styled duet with Rhonda Vincent that recalls those classic pairings of George & Melba, Conway & Loretta and Porter & Dolly. Maybe it's the inspired flourishes of Garrish's pedal steel or Aubrey Haynie's sterling fiddle, or Watson's vocals that are so intense and full of personal nuances, but this album breathes with seductive energy. All in all, A TASTE OF THE TRUTH is a delightful musical experience that will have any fan of genuine country music wanting more. **AC**  
www.shanachie.com

