



Various Artists **"Signature Sounds 10th Anniversary Collection"** Signature Sounds Records

In trying to recall the route that led me to an awareness of the Massachusetts based label, Signature Sounds, I concluded that it all began with the seven minute long "Summer Of Love" composed by musician and writer, Pete Nelson. I stumbled across his performance of the song on the first Martha's Vineyard writer's compilation, a 1993 Rounder release. A few years later Pete's [stunning] album **"The Restless Boys Club"** appeared, and that disc included a studio reading of the song. And who released Nelson's album? – doh! - why Signature Sounds, of course.

To say that in the field of roots music, Signature Sounds has musically furnished listener's with an uninterrupted, rich, insightful, entertaining trip, through the latter half of the closing decade of the twentieth century and into the dawn of this edgy new millennium, sound to me like a fairly even handed and balanced statement. There's zero bias there, founded on the criteria that good music deserves praise, and *vice versa*. To date the label has officially released nearly seventy recordings, involving some thirty solo performers and bands. During its early days the label's recordings focused on performers, based, like the label, in Western Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley. In time that focus broadened to embrace performers from further a field – the west coast state of Oregon, Canada, *Music City*, Tennessee and more. Next year that focus will broaden further, for the first Signature release by a non North American based performer.

Although the label's first release, a charity recording, appeared in late 1993, it wasn't until early 1995 that the label was launched as a fully functioning commercial undertaking. The double disc compilation **"Signature Sounds 10th Anniversary Collection"** is a celebration of the decade that has ensued. Disc 1 traces the label's musical history via seventeen previously released, *already familiar* "Signature Songs," while Disc 2 "Off The Record" amounts to a dozen unreleased tracks from the label's vaults.

Two pre-2000 tracks bookend Disc 1, respectively being, Salamander Crossing's reading of "Five Days In May" [*] taken from their **"Bottleneck Dreams"** [1998], while from **"Ride"** [1997], Louis Taylor's "Blue Norther" is the tale of a waitress, and "Yankee girl," barely getting by on the San Padre Island Gulf coast of Texas. The trio of pre-2000 tracks is completed by the goodtime "Maryland Country Road," from Erica Wheeler's **"The Harvest"** [1996] - personally speaking, an early Signature favourite here at *Wood Acres*. The **"10th Anniversary Collection"** liner booklet features the credit, *"Produced by Jim Olsen,"* and I guess that Signature's CEO, and one-time dj [of almost twenty decades standing] thoroughly enjoyed assembling this compilation. In terms of running order, although Jim quotes Dave Carter & Tracy Grammer's **"Tanglewood Tree"** as a favourite album in our accompanying interview feature, he has chosen "Gentle Arms Of Eden" from **"Drum Hat Buddha"** [2001] for Disc 1. Josh Ritter is already a star in Ireland [and *his time* in America is not far off], and the testosterone-fuelled tale of teenage passion, "Kathleen," is a bright shiny gem that scored Josh the 2004 Bammie [Boston Area Music Award] for "Song Of The Year." At the same ceremony, Lori McKenna was presented with the "Female Singer/Songwriter of the Year" Award, and from this year's awesome **"Bittertown"** we have "Lone Star."

Salamander Crossing's vocalist, Rani Arbo, enjoys the most exposure on this collection and is featured on three cuts, one being on Disc 2. Her second contribution to Disc 1 is the traditional "Turtle Dove" fronting her current combo, daisy mayhem. In terms of interpreting the blues, Erin McKeown's "Blackbirds" is full of electrically charged *snap and pop*, while, Wisconsin born and bred and now Mass. based, label newcomer Jeffrey Foucault delivers the acoustic driven *anti-war* history lesson "Pearl

Handled Pistol" – featuring appearances by General George Custer, Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill. Newcomers to the label in 2004, and a *new/old* fashioned string band to boot, The Mammals perform "Father William." Mark Erelli, a Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Songwriting Contest winner in 1999 [Dave & Tracy were winner two years earlier], duets with Texas based songbird, Kelly Willis, on "Compass & Companion" the title cut of his Y2K sophomore Signature release. Also appearing on Disc 1 is, Richard Shindell's testament to Friday night thruway mayhem "Transit," Amy Rigby's ribald, no holds barred and hilarious "Are We Ever Gonna Have Sex Again," plus songwriter cuts from Kris Delmhorst, Peter Mulvey and Mary Gauthier, and "Joyful, Joyful" by Brooks Williams – an acoustic guitar instrumental based upon the "Ode To Joy" theme from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

Over on Disc 2, the cut that pinned my ears back from the get go was Lori McKenna's bitingly perfect *live* performance of "Ignorance," captured at Passim's in August this year. It turns out the song was penned by Aussie Americana artist, Kasey Chambers, whose whiney voice has, to date, irritated and failed to impress these ears. That said, I now have to reverse my opinion on her skill as a writer, since "Ignorance" is one hell of a powerful *raw-to-the-bone* protest song, and one the seemingly, anaesthetised segment of the world's developed nations need to sit and listen to, attentively. It name checks a number of events – a man shot outside an unspecified House of Blues, the Columbine shooting, colour prejudice, declares that "*children are dying in Vietnam*" and "*there's children starving in Cambodia*," and tellingly comments on [the developed nations] wastefulness with "*We eat when we are hungry, we throw the rest away*." As for the chorus, that runs to a call to arms "*If you're not pissed off at the world, Then you're just not paying attention, You can turn off your tv's and go about your day, Just 'cause you don't see it, doesn't mean it's gone away*." Josh Ritter opens Disc 2 with the laid back "Don't Wake Juniper," Richard Shindell's performance of Charles Lyonheart's "Shades Of Black, Shades Of Blue" previously appeared on the limited edition Y2K Signature EP "**Spring**," Mark Erelli tackles the Roy Orbison penned classic "Crying," while "Amnesia Of The Heart" from Louis Taylor is a slow burning love song cut during her "**Written In Red**" sessions of late 1999.

The western swing melody on Erin McKeown's *live* cut "Little Cowboy," at times, strays perilously close to a Gary P. Nunn melody. Also an *in concert* recording "Don't Know Nothing" finds Amy Rigby supported by the guitar work of Eliza's brother, Tony Gilkyson. Peter Mulvey recorded Radiohead's "Airbag" in the Davis Square T-Station [during his "**Ten Thousand Mornings**" sessions] and his reading comes c/w train noises, while the plaintive *anti-war* lullaby "You Must Slumber" is a "**Tanglewood Tree**" out-take featuring Tracy on lead vocal and fiddle, supported vocally, on occasions, by Dave. Toward the close of Disc 2, there's a pair of *traditional arranged* songs, and Rani Arbo & daisy meyhem's wistful string band styled "Long Time Travelling," is followed by a soulful, electric guitar rendition of "Ain't No Train" from Kris Delmhorst and the Rebel Chickens. Looking to the future, Irishman Mark Geary's album "**Ghost's**" is due for release by Signature Sounds next year. The title cut from Geary's album closes track Disc 2, and it's a percussion rich, pop shuffle that features Josh Ritter on support vocal.

Across both CD's Jim Olsen has tended to focus on material that states "*who we are and where we are currently*," with acknowledgement, in passing, of the label's solid *back pages*. Even though I'm disappointed that there's not a Pete Nelson cut, it's an approach I'd endorse. This release includes a detailed twenty-page liner booklet tracing the label's history and artists. Cheers Signature Sounds, happy birthday, here's to your next ten great rootsy years.

Note.

[*] – The song was penned by Jim Cuddy and Greg Kellor of Canadian country rockers, Blue Rodeo.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood
Kerrville Kronikles 11/04