

Crescent City Lullaby. Although it is simply played it has an extraordinary edge to it which is evocative of those ghastly days. With its closing notes sounding like a New Orleans funeral march, this symbolic end is certainly taking a stand at what happened and will probably continue to happen for generations to come.

A man with valour to write and perform the songs he damn well wants, Mark Elliott is someone we should have heard of before. His obvious talent for putting together a first-rate album is there for all to see, and when the quality is this good it makes you feel rejuvenated and to thank whoever that you are around to hear such quality. **RH**
www.markelliottmusic.com

**Zona Jones
PROVE ME
RIGHT**
AGR Television
Records 1922049
★★★★

Texas honky-tonk country of the best quality



Zona Jones comes out of the Texas Gulf Coast honky-tonk tradition that also produced George Jones, Tracy Byrd and Mark Chesnutt, so it's no surprise that his freshman outing is very much in that mould. Well rooted in the world of country music, Jones is a stand out performer and has played with some of the finest musicians in this genre. He is now signed to Tracy Lawrence's Rocky Comfort Records, and this aptly-titled album is a very listenable, uplifting and, most of all, engaging CD of well-conceived, well-played and well-sung songs by the guy next door with a crack team of Nashville session players. Names like Hargus 'Pig' Robbins, Aubrey Haynie, Dan Dugmore, Brent Mason, Joe Spivey, Lonnie Wilson, Robby Turner, Steve Nathan should give an idea of the quality we're talking here.

The arrangements are mainly driven by toe-tapping drum beats, nice bass lines, soaring guitars, and great musical additions including fiddle, keyboards, hand claps, and backing vocals from John Wesley Ryles and Curtis Young.

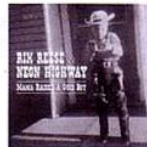
Tony Martin and Mark Nesler, a pair of talented singers who failed to ignite their singing careers a few years ago, have now emerged as two of the best 'traditional' country songwriters on Music Row and are responsible for the opening *Could Not Stop Myself From Loving You*, plus *When You Love 'Em Like Crazy* and *Go Away*.

The latter is a classic country ballad, whilst *When You Love 'Em Like Crazy* is a Strait-styled ballad that features a genuine, sincere vocal from Jones and a fitting solo from fiddler Haynie. Another song worth mentioning is *You Should've Seen Her This Morning*, the current single, with great lyrics and excellent pedal steel guitar playing Robby Turner. There are also a couple of oldies—both long-time favourites of mine. Randy Goodrum's *Bluer Than Blue*—a one-time pop hit for Michael Johnson—is given a more straightforward country treatment that works

well. Darrell Staedtler's *Blame It On Mexico*—best-known from an early George Strait recording—suits the warm-voiced Jones like a glove. Yeah! Overall a great country album to put up there with the best that Strait, Jackson, Lawrence or Chesnutt have to offer. **AC**
www.agr-music.com

**Rik Reese &
Neon Highway
MAMA RAISED
A GOOD BOY**
Self Released
★★★★☆

Demonstrating a legend in the making



Upon initially hearing this album without having read any information about Rik, I thought this album consisted of tracks written by other people. But, to my own and probably other's amazement, this eleven track album is one which was entirely self-penned by Rik. Now, there are many artists out there who write both the lyrics and music but often to not a very high standard. Here, that is not the case. To say this guy has talent pouring out of his ears would be an understatement.

With its enticing opening that then seems to explode right before your very ears, *Long White Line* contains simply outrageous electric guitar playing with vocals that more than hold themselves against this musical detonation and damn right awesomeness. *Old Spice 'Er Gun Powder* also has a great opening and the potential to become a driving song legend. Cruising along one of those American highways, the type that never seems to end, whilst this song being played in the background with your sunglasses reflecting the Mid West glaze certainly sounds like this reviewer's idea of bliss. With its Kiss undertones, you can just imagine the efforts of Gene Simmons being a part of this track due to the gradual build up on electric guitar normally associated with his work. It has an almost romantic sound to it which makes you want to raise that lighter in the air and sway from side to side with your best girl by your side. Probably the best track of the album is *Headin' Down to Memphis* due to its Alan Jackson sound that has something extra which I just can't quite put my finger on; a sense of excellence I suppose. The piano and guitar playing act as though a musical duel is happening, with those responsible for producing such sounds knowing that only one of them will emerge victorious. Such musical injections hardly happen here in the UK on the so-called pop music charts, and this reviewer certainly looks on with envious ears when hearing such tracks being released in Canada.

This being his first album, such material has the potential to go on to even better things. Having heard many Canadian bands and solo artists before, this has to be one of the best emerging from our Commonwealth neighbourhood. Roll on the next album. **RH**

www.neonhighwayband.com

**Jinder
9CENTS FROM
BENELUX**
Din Of Ecstasy
★★★★☆

Hypnotic English singer-songwriter you need to seek out



For those who have seen Jinder perform live or ever heard him before you'll have witnessed his wonderful writing techniques and his vocal styling that is both hypnotic and enchanting. The opening song to this album *Train In Your Voice*, is the tale of a parting lover; a common concept for a song, but Jinder's way with words and with song, place a spin on such a relationship that is captivating. 'I can hear those fields in your voice when you're speaking, I can hear the cold of the wind in your throat, I can feel my life in the way you're breathing. Kinda makes me wish I never spoke. Kinda makes me wish I never spoke to you.' The powerful and overruling vocals sculpt this release, but there is wonderful musicianship, guitars in particular. A few of the songs are brooding and weighty, such as *Frozen Ocean* and *Townes Blues*, but the driving *Waiting Line* and *In My Time Of Dying* featuring expressive electric guitars and a rock-grit feel push this release. *Vincent*, is the classic song by Don McLean about Van Gogh, the ensuing songs were all written by Jinder. Following all of his previous work this is certainly the best yet and if you haven't yet got a release by Jinder in your CD collection I'd certainly recommend this one. **LB**
www.jinder.co.uk

**Iron & Wine
NORFOLK**
06/20/05
Sub Pop Records
★★★★

Beam's band generates a dense and percussive electric sound that you will either love or hate



'How's everybody doin'' are Sam Beam's opening words on this limited edition, live set. The disc is housed in a plain brown card case with a circular central cut-out, in the style of a 7-inch single. As for a track list or details of the accompanying musicians there are none, which is where computers come into their own as, onscreen, the player (at least) lists the eighteen song titles.

Each song performed, Beam intones a perfunctory 'Thank you (very much)' and moves on to the next number. If there were any, the between song introductions have been pretty well edited out other than the mid-disc insight that he'd never played Norfolk, Virginia before. Phase 1 of Iron & Wine's recording career, featured Beam as a wistfully-voiced solo performer who supported himself with finger-picked or strummed acoustic guitar. Norfolk renditions in the latter style include the opening *Sunset Soon Forgotten* and *Naked As We Came*.

Phase 2 Iron & Wine, Sam with band, entered the public domain with the 2005 release *WOMAN KING*.

This album was recorded a few months later. Melodies that you can hum are certainly not Sam's Phase 2 forte. Neither is the rigorous pursuit of verse and chorus constructions. His preference, line-after-line, leans toward stream of consciousness lyrics. In that regard, Beam is rarely a teller of tales. Supported by a trance like cyclical guitar rhythm, drums and occasional droning fiddle, *Woman King*, is a typical Phase 2 impressionistic mood piece. For those readers of an aurally sensitive disposition, please note that the *Evening On The Ground* (Lilith's Song) lyric features one occurrence of the 'F' word. **AW**
http://www.ironandwine.com/
http://www.myspace.com/ironandwine

**Griffin House
FLYING
UPSIDE DOWN**
Nettwerk 5 037703
076129
★★★★★

An album of very intricate and personal West Coast tinged country-folk songs



First let me tell you about the album cover—it's in mono and is very atmospheric with Griffin standing arms outstretched in a doorway with a faint Star and Stripes *FLYING UPSIDE DOWN* behind him. It's a photo I wish that I'd taken. Griffin House has a very smooth but powerful voice and wrote all 13 songs on this wonderful album.

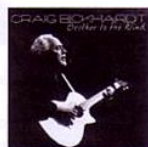
Title track, *Flying Upside Down* is a young man's lament for the mess his Government has made for his generation sung quietly over a violin and piano backing. Thankfully it's nowhere near as mawkish as it could be. Stand out song and the one you must find on the internet is *I Remember (It's Happening Again)*; a very clever and intricate folk-protest song that weaves his Grandfather's memories of being on the Arizona in Pearl Harbour in WW1 and the wars that his country are making people fight now. I genuinely haven't done the song justice with those words—find it and judge for yourself.

Echoes of Jackson Browne, Tom Petty and even Bruuuuccceee haunt songs like *Let Me In*, *The Guy That Says Goodbye*, *The Lonely One* and *Good For You* like benevolent ghosts as Griffin bares his soul on a series of love and lost-love songs.

Everything about Griffin House and *FLYING UPSIDE DOWN* leads me to believe he can be a huge star in the States and hopefully Europe in the next few years. **AH**
www.griffinhouse.nettwerk.com
www.myspace.com/griffinhouse

**Craig Bickhardt
BROTHER TO
THE WIND**
Stone Barn
★★★★☆

A satisfying collection you'll find yourself listening to with regularity



You may not be familiar with Bickhardt's name, but should instantly recognise hit songs he has penned—for instance, *You're The Power* (Kathy Mattea), *In Between*

...the new releases

Dances (Pam Tillis) and *It Must Be Love* (Ty Herndon). Craig recently returned to his native Philadelphia after quarter of a century plying his trade in Nashville. Dipping into his vast back catalogue this twelve song, easy-listening, folk-country styled collection, his third solo outing this millennium, was cut in Music City and the contributors include Beth Nielsen Chapman, Janis Ian, Tim O'Brien, Maura O'Connell, Darrell Scott, plus Jack Sundrud and Rusty Young of Poco. Bickhardt's daughter, Aislinn, supplies distinctive harmony vocals to the inspirational *Carrying A Dream* and the penultimate cut, *Prayers For You*.

A nimble finger-picked acoustic guitar introduces Bickhardt's inspired reading of the traditional *Lord Franklin*, the only cover in this pack. Based on John Renbourn's arrangement, this tale of the nineteenth century British Arctic explorer who perished at sea is given a Celtic flavour by way of John Mock's bodhran, whistle and harmonium. Co-written with Don Schlitz, the baseball themed *The Real Game* opens with the insight: 'There's a millionaire at shortstop and another in the field. The designated hitter has five commercial deals.' Comparing stadium pros with kids who play on a vacant lot simply 'for the sake of the game' with 'a hand me down glove,' the writers have constructed a wonderfully stinging commentary on the jaw-dropping sums of money awash in baseball—and for that matter most high-profile sports. Texas based collaborators Terri Hendrix (vocal) and Lloyd Maines (Dobro) contribute to the latter swing-paced cut as well as the spiritually inflected album opener *Life With The Sound Turned Down*.

Bickhardt is a subtle lyricist, who conjures the extraordinary from ordinary events in life's journey, the waltz paced *Donald And June* being a classic example. *If He Came Back Again* is faith inspired lyrically, while the gently paced *This Old House* dates from two decade back and Bickhardt's trio with fellow hit writers Tom Schuyler and Fred Knobloch. As the owners leave, given a voice, the house reflects: 'Now you're packing up the laughter, And sweeping out the tears.' **AW**
<http://www.craigbickhardt.com/>
<http://www.myspace.com/craigbickhardt>

Cracker
SUNRISE IN THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY
 Freeworld
 Freem014

★★★★

Alt-rockers
 refreshingly discover Glamrock and tunes

Cracker are one of those bands that I've been aware of for a few years now and always associated them with that 'grunge-alternative-indie-noisy' genre of young people's music. There's nothing new or really adventurous about *SUNRISE IN THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY* but it's a stonking, sharp-tongued, witty,

guitar led no-nonsense rock album that begs repeated playing.

What's not to like? Opening song *Yalla Yalla (Let's Go)* sets the bar very high with a belting rocker about a soldier's life in Basra, Fallujah and Mosul. 'Yalla Yalla' was what his girlfriend would call out during their special moments so it's what he chooses to cry out when he goes into battle. Neil Young was wrong. Young musicians can write anti-war songs; they're just more subtle about it. Cracker goes country on *Hand Me My Inhaler* and *Friends*. The former is all twang guitars and National Steel as David Lowery sounds like Randy Newman fronting a bar band in Bakersfield.

I Could be Wrong/I Could be Right and *Hey Bret* are both no nonsense 12 bar boogie stompers that will get audiences around the world bopping 'til they drop.

Things slow down with the final two songs: *Darling One* is a bittersweet love song and title track *Sunrise in the Land of Milk and Honey* is a sarcastic ode to a lover that wants more than he gives her: 'So if you wanna live/let's live together in boas and feathers/and Weimar Decadence'....now there's an expression you never expected to see in Maverick!

SUNRISE IN THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY won't change music as we know it but it's great fun cranked up in the car on a sunny day! **AH**
www.crackersoul.com
www.myspace.com/crackerhatesmyspace

Bobby Osborne and the Rocky Top X-Press
BLUEGRASS AND BEYOND
 Rounder 11661-0603-2PA

★★★★★

Lovers of traditional sounds of bluegrass will surely enjoy this

Bobby Osborne may be 76 years old but time has not dulled his pure, high lonesome tenor voice. This is his third album for Rounder Records but although the title might suggest that he has moved a bit beyond a very traditional bluegrass style, long standing fans have no need to worry. The 'beyond' element merely means that, mixed in with more traditional material, Bobby has selected a few, more contemporary country songs, but, given a solid bluegrass dressing they sound as though they have been a part of the extensive bluegrass canon for years. And what may these more contemporary country songs be? Well, Bobby opens the programme with Jerry Reed's *Let's Sing Our Song* and this track alone, with Glen Duncan's searing fiddle, sets the tone for the rest of the album. Another familiar country song which Osborne has selected is *Drivin' My Life Away*, a number one hit for Eddie Rabbitt in 1980 but one which Bobby and his Rocky Top X-Press have transformed into a surprisingly good bluegrass number, giving it a whole new lease of life. Add to this the melancholic *Girl From Yesterday*, a staple from the Eagles' catalogue and *After The Fire Is Gone*, one of the many number one hits scored by Conway

Twitty and Loretta Lynn almost forty years ago. On this last named number Bobby is joined by Rhonda and Darrin Vincent and it is sung as a duet between Bobby and Rhonda, and you don't get more bluegrass than a combination like that! And that takes care of the 'beyond' part of this release.

As one might reasonably expect from a more traditional bluegrass album, room is always given to a bit of gospel music, and here we find Bobby being joined by Marty Stuart and his wife, Connie Smith, on *What Would You Give In Exchange For Your Soul*. The final curtain descends with another powerful gospel number, *Way Up On The Mountain*, jointly written by Ira Louvin and Anne Young. Another expected feature of most bluegrass albums is the inclusion of at least one instrumental track, and here we have *Hyden*, a Bobby Osborne original celebrating his place of birth. On this track, as is customary, each band member stands briefly in the spotlight demonstrating their individual talent on their chosen instrument. The remaining songs come from the pens of writers like Larry Cordle and Jim Rushing, Glen Duncan and Jerry Salley and Chris Stuart whose nostalgic *Shenandoah Wind*, which harks back to an event of the Civil War, is just one of the many high points of this excellent album.

Of course, Bobby Osborne's distinctive style on mandolin plays an important role throughout, but the Rocky Top X-Press is a band of outstanding players whose contribution is immense. Among this tight group are Bobby Osborne Jr on guitar, Daryl Mosley on acoustic bass, Glen Duncan, who produced the album, on fiddle, guitar and banzooki, Matt DeSpain on resonator guitar and finally, Dana Cupp on banjo. Lovers of traditional sounds of bluegrass will surely enjoy what they hear, including the numbers which might, until now, have been thought of as being 'beyond' what one might have expected a bluegrass band to have tackled. **LK**
www.rounder.com

Julian Dawson
DEEP RAIN
 Blue Rose BLU
 CD0460

★★★★

A wonderful combination of singer and producer creating a pleasant listening experience

It was always going to be a good one. The coming together of pure-voiced Brit Dawson and the sultry country-soul production of Dan Penn. And from the opening strains of the title track you know where it's going, a warm, welcoming coming together of individually impressive artists. Penn doesn't get his name up in lights but this is close to being a duo album; he doesn't play and only adds vocals to a couple of tracks but he's co-written four of the songs and his influence is pervasive. Dawson's bright, sometimes Beatle-like country-pop is filtered through Penn's own view of Nashville. There's

a stellar line-up of players—bassist Daniel Tashian, Billy Livsey on keyboards, and guitarist Steve Allen and Steve Ebe on drums (both of Nashville all-star tribute band the Long Players), with guests such as Bill Lloyd on guitar.

Team-up songs such as *Brokenhearted Eyes* and the beautiful *Walking On The Dead* work exceptionally, alongside Dawson's solo numbers (the dancing *That's Why God Made Saturday Night*, and the perfect country soul of *Keys To The Kingdom Of Love*) and the splendid *Barbed Wire Fence*, written with Iain Matthews. If there are weak moments it's the hum-along stab at *What Becomes Of The Brokenhearted*, which probably seemed like a good idea in the bonhomie of the studio, and the slight *I'm Coming Home (Sweet Home)*, sounding like Dawson and Penn trying to do a Nashville-by-numbers. **ND**
www.julianadawson.com

Liam McKahey and the Bodies
LONELY ROAD
 Series 8 Records
 SER007CD

★★★★★

Murder ballads and Tex-Mex from former Cousteau front man

LONELY ROAD is a collection of ten songs from the darker side of alt.country—think Burt Bacharach meets Nick Cave. McKahey's rich baritone voice brings to mind the likes of Edwyn Collins, Richard Hawley and Scott Walker. Between 1999 and 2003 Liam McKahey was a member of the London based band Cousteau. The band had success in Italy and America and had music featured in TV advertisements and film. Now living in Canberra, Australia, this is Liam's first post-Cousteau offering. *LONELY ROAD* was recorded over four days in London just before he left.

McKahey sounds at his best when delivering his stories against a sparse percussive background. His strong, distinct voice is particularly well showcased on the second track *Unheeded Tidings* which chronicles the emotional downfall of a young man and is interspersed with some great fiddle playing by Joe Peet. Later, *Lovers & Fools* is a well-delivered murder ballad complete with mariachi style trumpet, played by John Hutchinson, and sounds a lot like the great Tex-Mex offerings of Calexico. *Seraphina* is another stand out track and *Blackwater Pass* with Renee-Louise Carafina is reminiscent of the Nick Cave and Kylie Minogue duet *Where the Wild Roses Grow*.

Production wise the album is pretty good. Some of the doubling up of McKahey's vocal on tracks seems a little unnecessary and I tended to prefer the songs that showcased his voice more and had a more live feel to them. Overall *LONELY ROAD* is a good album and should appeal to anyone who is a fan of Nick Cave, Tom Waits, Calexico or Puerto Muerto. **ER**
<http://www.myspace.com/liammckahey>

