

...the new releases

and the nadir is reached with *Now, Divide*, which 'distinguishes' itself by consisting of nothing more than relentless humming accompanied by strummed acoustic guitars. An album as lacking in imagination as its title. **JS**

www.molijnajohnson.com

Karl Culley BUNDLE OF NERVES

Triumphant Sound Records
★★★★

Probably the strangest yet most exhilarating music released this past year

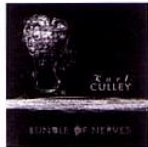
Opening *BUNDLE OF NERVES* is *Elephant Juice* an exciting song with strange yet lively music accompanied by the oddest lyrics. What is Elephant Juice? Throughout the two minutes Karl repeats: 'I love you but you never come round with the Elephant Juice,' and these are the only lyrics throughout the short song which abruptly ends with the sound of violently fast music and the sound of swords being drawn from their sheaths. Odd maybe isn't the word for it, but interesting definitely is. The interesting and oddness doesn't stop at track one. *I'm Not Proud Of Myself*, has a tinge of chanting monks, and a hint of Arabic in Karl's singing style, making this such a remarkably attractive piece of work. What genre is this piece, well, there isn't a genre to describe it. Unique doesn't even sum up this work as Karl has created something here extremely exquisite that goes beyond being unique—he should be proud of himself. In *Her Nature* is a comical number, as Karl sings with Giles Perring and Simon Edwards about a girl who stabs the men in the spine, describing the girl like a scorpion. The music again is full of mad life, with manic sounds screaming from Giles' Fender jaguar electric guitar, making this a song to go crazy about. On the other hand, *Thick as Thieves* isn't as outstanding, good as it may be, Karl's vocals seemed to be laid upon the music slightly too thick, and through the panting and puffing it would seem he is struggling to push out those notes, making it debatable whether or not the panting was worth it. *The Haunting of Karl Culley* is another exciting track which with the help from Giles and Simon makes a perfect ride of fascinating heights and scary anticipations. A truly incredible collection of musical art which Karl should be more than proud of. **CB**

Robyn Landis MANY MOONS

Brave Hearts Music
★★★★

Fast growing and addictive

It is of little surprise that Robyn Landis has garnered comparisons to the slightly better known singer-songwriter Dar Williams. Her raspy smooth vocal is set to well-composed, shoulder shifting ballads. Her uplifting



energy is as addictive, if not more so than that of Dar Williams, yet that said there seems to be something about Landis that is not quite so likeable. Her knowing tone is less approachable than the welcoming Williams. However, Landis' second album *MANY MOONS* warrants attention. Having grown since her days as one half of Americana duo Short & Sweet, Landis' likeability factor is fast growing.

MANY MOONS is slow to begin, yet skip past the opening tracks to the unforgettable *Hey Dog* and it becomes clear that Landis knows how to compete. The beautifully crafted four minutes is a tantalising tribute. Coming into her own again for the politically opinionated *Paul's Song*, Landis proves a thought-provoking presence. Had only *MANY MOONS* contained more numbers of the same ilk. Landis clearly feels at home in saccharine ballad territory, yet her rich vocal demands much more. *Leave You Behind* demands energy, her passive approach drowns any potential.

MANY MOONS contains some tender teasers but on the whole fails to please. Landis has a silky strong vocal but it proves her downfall, often drowning the simplest of compositions. When Landis reigns it in and expresses an opinion, *MANY MOONS* sparks interest. Williams needn't worry just yet. **JW**

www.robynlandis.com

Joy Kills Sorrow DARKNESS SURE BECOMES THIS CITY

Signature Sounds Recordings
★★★★

Pleasingly, a string band that understands how to kill the speed

Formed in 2005, Joy Kills Sorrow is a five-piece Boston based string band and *DARKNESS SURE BECOMES THIS CITY* is their sophomore release. Bluegrass pioneers the Monroe Brothers broadcast during the 1930s from radio station WJKS, hence the band's name. Following a number of line-up changes, these days the quintet is composed of founder/guitarist Matthew Arcara—2006 winner of Winfield's National Flatpicking Championship, banjoist Wesley Corbett, vocalist Emma Beaton—2008 Canadian Folk Music Awards Young Performer of the Year, bassist Bridget Kearney—winner of the 2006 John Lennon Songwriting Contest and mandolin player Jacob Jolliff. Kearney is the principle songwriter with five credits while Emma Jean Beaton contributes two tunes, the remaining quartet of songs being covers.

Of the four cover songs, *New Shoes* was penned by Caleb Klauder. Uncle Earl alumni Kristin Andreassen composer of *Send A Letter*, was born and raised in Portland, Orengo. Furthermore, by dint of her membership of Sometyms Why, Kristin is a Joy Kills Sorrow label mate. Dave Miles Keenan and Nova Karina Devonia, aka Miles & Karina, are a



Seattle based duo and their myspace site pegs their style lounge, country and Latin. *We Will Have Our Day* appeared on the duo's 2006 album *WHEREGO*, and the fourth and final cover is New Hampshire based Jeff Talmage's *If It's Rainin'*.

Having already acknowledged the band's folk, rock, pop, and jazz indulgences, the album closes with Beaton's bluesy *You Make Me Feel Drunk*. **AW**

http://www.joykillsorrow.com

Leslie Wilson BROKEN HEARTS

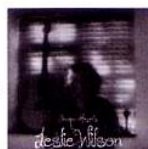
New Mountain Music NMM 2009/1
★★★★

A brave attempt at a different style of music

Born in Willenhall, West Midlands, Leslie Wilson currently lives in Cork, Ireland. For many years he performed under the name of Les Wilson and the Mighty Houserockers, playing slide guitar and singing hard electric blues and rock'n'roll. The band headlined many prestigious blues festivals both in Britain and Europe but Wilson admits that he spent a lot of time listening to some of the great singer-songwriters. Growing tired of the style of music he was playing he dropped the 'Les Wilson,' reverting to 'Leslie,' set about writing original material and has now released what he calls his 'debut' Americana type album. It's a brave attempt at a different style of music but it falls short on a number of counts.

Many of the self-composed songs stay with the overall theme of broken hearts but lyrically a number of them sound rather contrived and lack any real depth. Of course, there are exceptions; *Half A Man (Without You)* and *I Don't Want To Get Over You* but, generally speaking, the level of self-pity expressed in numbers like *Don't Cry About Me*, *Piece Of My Heart*, *Sorry But I've Got No Sörrys Left* and *Why Did You Cry* fail to generate much sense of empathy in the listener.

Vocally, Wilson is not a particularly distinctive stylist. When it comes to a sense of conviction he fails to be as convincing as the material demands and this, combined with a lack of any raw passion, takes away a lot from his deliveries. It has long been accepted that the selection of a deep and meaningful song from another's pen is invariably preferable to a weak original, and Wilson has mixed a few strong numbers in with his own compositions. The first of these is *Gulf Coast Highway*, written and recorded by Nanci Griffith some years ago. An excellent composition, Wilson is joined by Jean Vincent and it is sung as a duet. Unfortunately, as good as the song is, the duo does little to enable this reviewer to nominate it as a standout song. Much the same can be said of *Love Hurts*, a great Boudleaux Bryant composition, popularised by the Everly Brothers. Wilson and Vincent add nothing to the original, and they fail to do so on Rodney Crowell's soulful *Till I Gain Control Again*. However, in fairness, Wilson does make a very good job



of Richard Thompson's *Waltzing For Dreamers* and his rendition of another Thompson original, *How I Wanted To* is also worthy of mention.

Despite the number of negative comments, it must be said that Wilson is an excellent guitarist. For the most part he has laid his electric guitar aside and retrieved his acoustic guitar. He has surrounded himself with a group of equally talented musicians who between them add accordion, fiddle, pedal steel, banjo, piano, Dobro, cello, harmonica, bass and drums, giving him a solid bedrock on which to build. It may appear presumptuous to say that since this is Wilson's first attempt at recording in a style very different to what he has been used to playing, if he is serious about his writing and is prepared to work at his vocal deliveries, he will surely progress in the difficult field of music he has chosen. **LK**

www.myspace.com/lesliewilsonacoustic

Meg Hutchinson THE LIVING SIDE

Red House Records
★★★★

Meg says, maybe it's time we got back to the basics of life

Central Massachusetts bred, Boston based Hutchinson's sixth solo outing is her third consecutive disc that Crit Harmon (Martin Sexton, Susan Werner, Lori McKenna) has produced. Many of the players who contributed to her Red House debut *COME UP FULL* (2008) reprise their roles here. On this occasion Richard Gates (bass), Jeff Berlin (drums), Brad Hatfield (keyboards) and Steve Sadler (mandola, accordion) are augmented by Kevin Barry (acoustic and electric guitars) while Harmon pitches in on guitars, piano and more.

In album opener *Hard To Change*, her voice double tracked, Hutchinson alludes to the: 'Year of the billion dollar bailout' while relative to saving time modern technology earns the stiff rebuke, 'Well if they save so much then where's all mine?' The American Dream hasn't been irrevocably crushed, but it's certainly battered and badly bruised. That said, Meg's real aim here is to again enjoy the simple pleasure of face-to-face communication. As for laptops, I-pods and their ilk she advocates: 'Turn 'em all off and tell me about your dreams.'

The lines: 'When I drink whiskey, sometimes I do things I don't regret, Sometimes I say things I can't forget' bookend *Hopeful Things*, and while they are possibly personal and true for Meg, it's her mid-song reference to the *Miraculous* real life event—'Big jet floating down the Hudson, Everyone balancing on those sinking wings'—that truly reflects her optimism that everything will be alright. Observed from an airplane window *Yea Tho We Walk* opens with the picture perfect: 'Cold morning in the Midwest, winter earth in a wedding dress.' There's subsequent mention of how: 'this valley grows



darker each time,' while in the closing lines Hutchinson bids us: 'Do unto others, love thy brother.' Meg's source is obvious the sentiment however remains resolutely unchanged. As for waltzes, Hutchinson excels at those; *See Me Now* and *Something Else* being rather splendid examples.

While *Travel In* is the obvious road song, with opening line mention of lakes Michigan and Erie, as a whole THE LIVING SIDE is quite the travelogue. Elsewhere there's mention of New York City and its Lady of Liberty, the Hudson and Omaha, Nebraska. Such is the breathy intimacy of Meg's vocals throughout, on one level it's simply enough to let the forty-five minutes of music on THE LIVING SIDE wash over you—now there's a truly heavenly experience. Crack open her lyrics however and shiny gems sparkle before your eyes.

AW
http://www.meghutchinson.com/

Mike O'Leary
FOOTPRINT
Self-Released

★★
An interesting album of Essex Americana from local guitar slinger



Mike O'Leary has been in and around the South of England blues and country music scene for quite a few years now and showcases both genres at regular club nights in Maldon, Essex. FOOTPRINT is his second album and a third, which is more bluegrass based, is already in the pipeline.

This album is steeped in country blues with some mighty fine guitar playing and a tight backing band; but...and it's a very big BUT is let down throughout by Mike's voice. I apologise immediately; especially as I can't sing a note, but Mike O'Leary's voice just isn't strong enough to be a lead singer. Some of the songs are actually quite good and in the hands of someone with a more distinctive voice could be quite memorable; especially *Orphans and Angels* which I liked a lot. It's the same with the barrelhouse tune *Country Girl* and the *Son of the Blues*, which is rollicking good fun with some great slide and twangy guitar in the background but needs a 'punchier' voice to carry it off.

FOOTPRINT is a 'nice' album from an even 'nicer' guy and hopefully someone will pick up on his songwriting skills and even guitar playing after listening to it, but I doubt if it will be as a singer. **AH**
www.olearyrocks.com

Phil Smith
GOLDMINE
Self-release via website

★★
'Strewth mate; there sure ain't many laughs here!'

Phil Smith has been around the Sydney music scene for a few years now and has played and recorded



with an assortment of bands in that time; which makes this solo album very difficult to understand. He claims to have discovered Americana music and Ryan Adams in particular a few years ago and this made him change his musical direction; if that is the case someone should buy him a couple of new CDs for his birthday.

The songs are all his own and come from a (young) lifetime of experiences—mostly bad, it would appear. Sadly Phil Smith appears to have listened to one too many Nick Drake and John Martyn albums because GOLDMINE just comes across as self-pitying and full of distress. I'm partial to a good sad love song myself; but these 11 songs make Leonard Cohen sound like Tommy Cooper. As someone who can't actually play a single note in tune it breaks my heart having to criticise a musician's work; but GOLDMINE has no actual saving graces; it's just gloomy for the sake of being gloomy.

AH
www.philsmithandthelights.com

James Hill and Anne Davison
TRUE LOVE DON'T WEEP
Borealis Records
BCD 195

★★★
Delightful pairing of ukulele and cello that really does work



James Hill and Anne Davison are Canadians and although they have been involved in a number of separate musical projects, playing the instruments in which they specialise, this is their first joint venture. Hill is widely recognised as a pre-eminent ukulele player whilst Davison is a celebrated cellist. The ukulele and cello may appear to be a rather odd pairing, but, in the hands of two masterful players they sit very comfortably together and the duo produce some totally absorbing pieces of music. The ukulele looks like a miniature guitar with four strings and although it is often associated with Hawaiian music, it dates back a few hundred years and is believed to have originated in Portugal. It became popular in America during the early twentieth century when a number of vaudeville acts adopted it and later, along with the banjo, it became an integral part of the many travelling minstrel shows. Perhaps the best known exponent of the ukulele in Britain was George Formby, who played a banjo ukulele, but it is worth noting that the late George Harrison was also a proficient player and he included it on a number of his recordings. In the hands of James Hill the ukulele is far more than a rhythm instrument. At various times he plays the tenor, soprano, banjo and slide ukulele and his virtuosity on the instrument is amazing. In addition he also adds guitar and fiddle and of course, he sings lead vocals on most songs. Anne Davison has a sweet voice and she sings some excellent harmonies. As for her cello, on some numbers she plucks the strings, providing a steady bass pulse while on others she bows and produces

some truly soulful sounds.

Of the dozen featured tracks there are four instrumentals, the traditional *Sakura, Sakura*, a sombre, atmospheric tune with an Oriental feel to it, a Hill original, *Dukes Alley Rag*, rather stately and sedate, *Ode To A Frozen Boot*, a finger-blistering Hill composition on which his virtuoso picking is nothing short of incredible, and a final lively original, *Richard's Reel*. These four instrumentals demonstrate that, in the hands of a master, the ukulele is a truly versatile instrument. The remaining eight tracks are a mix of traditional and original songs on which Hill and Davison vocalise. The opening number is the traditional *Every Night*, a folksy, sorrowful dirge, on which the duo are joined by Cathy Fink on fretless banjo and Marcy Marxer on bouzouki. The tempo changes on the next song, *One More Lie To Love*, the first of Hill's compositions before the duo deliver an unusual rendition of Stephen Foster's *Oh Susanna*, on which Hill switches to slide ukulele, creating some near hypnotic sounds. Other styles include a well executed blues, the traditional *Molly Brannigan*, a sultry version of the old torch song, *Because*, which features trumpet, and two uplifting numbers, both of which add clarinet and brass to lend something of a Dixieland feel to the programme.

TRUE LOVE DON'T WEEP, with its blend of traditional folk, blues, original material and impressive instrumentals, along with two voices which harmonise as well as those of Hill and Davison do, offers something different to much of what we hear these days and is a most pleasing debut from two serious musicians. **LK**
www.ukulelejames.com
www.annedavison.net

Lucky Marcell & The Ramblin' Three
SPEED KING
EL TORO RECORDS
884501 151313

★★★
Debut album from Serbian rockabilly revivalists

Many rock'n'roll purists believe the music died in 1959 when Buddy went airborne, or at least when Elvis released those bad soundtrack albums with the schmaltzy tunes in the early 1960s, but these lovers of rock'n'roll and its more primordial parent rockabilly will languish in the tunes of revivalists Lucky Marcell and the Ramblin' Three and their debut album SPEED KING.

Exhibiting the kind of raucous energy which made Johnny Burnette, Warren Smith and Wanda Jackson shudder and shake in the 1950s, the Serbian four-piece party out on original songs like *Rock'n'Roll Rhythm*, *How About Me*, *Pretty Baby*, *Pink Cadillac*, *Burnin'* and the title song, to gentler fair like the slow-paced waltz *Mister Moon*. A relatively brief album in terms of time, it is in actuality a rather generous disc of thirteen songs, most of them rockers and all of them sounding authentic. It reminds this reviewer of German



artist Sascha's rockabilly alter-ego band Dick Brave & the Back Beats and their 2005 album DICK THIS.

One of the most immediate things you'll notice about these recordings is the seemingly ancient sound which makes you think it was locked in a vault in 1954 and only recently discovered. For strict purists who will want to indoctrinate themselves into thinking this is genuinely fifty-five years old, recorded in mono and without the aid of digital remastering, this album is just the ticket. But for those who don't care about authenticity and understandably want to hear crystal clear sound for their money will definitely be disappointed. **DJ**

Alexandra Celano
I'M OVERCOME
BMI 884501 151313

★★★★
Uplifting inspirational album from sweet voiced singer-songwriter



Orange County, California native Alexandra Celano makes a stellar entry into the music world with her debut album, the inspirationally-based I'M OVERCOME. Writing every song herself, Celano complements her songs with a sweet and occasionally raspy voice. She is ably assisted by a group of talented musicians who lend supple instrumentation which includes strings, piano, mandolin, fiddle, Dobro, drums, bass, piano and more—although, of course, not all at the same time.

Like many inspirational projects, it's the lyrics which take centre stage, and they make clear her faith and aim to inspire. Sonically, I'M OVERCOME is a very easy-listening, relaxing record which does well to hear up close as it is to does to have it playing in the background. For this reviewer, it brings to mind the work of successful Christian group Point of Grace and in particular their recent foray into country, 2007's HOW YOU LIVE.

Many of the tracks are ballads and mid-tempos which suite Celano's voice splendidly, and carries a plethora of highlights, particularly her second-person narrative odes to Jesus, *More Than a Man*, *You're Good for Me and You*, along with the catchy pop of *I Will Go* and the banjo-thumping, Africa-influenced *Let the River Flow*. From the opening poppy title song to the closing Christmas-themed, bonus song *A Child Is Born*, I'M OVERCOME proves to be a pleasurable album of uplifting songs and delivered with fine finesse from its cast of players. **DJ**

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