

...the new releases

Mark Erelli
LITTLE VIGILS
Hillbilly Pilgrim Records
★★★★

His career is peppered with consistently great ones, but LITTLE VIGILS must be his best yet

LITTLE VIGILS was recorded during four days in October last year at Great North Sound Society in Southern Maine, an establishment that's owned by Sam Kassirer, long time keyboard player for Josh Ritter. According to Mark's web site a: 'small group of my favourite musicians and closest friends' were hand picked for the sessions. While Kassirer undertook the role of recording engineer, Ritter band mate Zack Hickman (upright bass, pump organ, piano, mandolin) produced LITTLE VIGILS, thereby reprising his role on DELIVERED Mark's 2008 release. The other session players were Neil Cleary (drums, percussion, vocals), Charlie Rose (pedal steel, banjo, cello, acoustic guitar) and Jake Armerding (mandolin, fiddle, vocals). Captured in the dusk of evening a drawing of the buildings that compose Great North Sound Society appears on the front cover of LITTLE VIGILS, and those words surface in the lyric of album opener *August*. A paean to the joys of marriage and parenthood, the lyric climaxes with the admission: 'A fool would ask for more,' and as proud parents watch their child peacefully slumber Erelli sings: 'God bless this little vigil we keep.' *Everything in Ruin* is a song for the coldest time of year, whereon Charlie Rose's pedal steel truly takes flight. Where *August* opened with a: 'Katy did fiddling on a summer's eve' as the *Ruin* winter begins to grip Erelli sings: 'Save one lone cricket fiddling for his life, Sawing off a shivery waltz before the frost.' Insect life also infests the opening lines of *Kingdom Come*, a song co-written with Stu Hanna and Rachael McShane during Erelli's Darwin Songhouse sojourn in the Spring of last year. From the same project, and co-written with Karine Polwart, the later *Mother Of Mysteries* explores Darwin's alternate Eden. Both songs feature background vocals by the Boston Rose's - Polenzani and Cousins.

High on mid-teen testosterone the magic of making garage band music is perfectly captured in the up-tempo (and autobiographical) *Basement Days*. Where the latter rocks out (and then some), there's a centuries old Appalachian ballad feel to the acoustic and introspective *Hemlock Grove*. Adapting words from Carolyn Curtis' children's book *I TOOK THE MOON FOR A WALK* (2005), Erelli's acoustic jazz tinged song of the same name is a delightful dark of night voyage/fantasy. In a collection abundant in memorable (hook laden) tunes *Same For Someone*—with Aoife O'Donovan (Crooked Still) backing vocal—and *Coming Home*—Mark set the music to the late Jim Chastain's poem—are further precisely fashioned gems. Erelli's voice and guitar bring this collection to a close with *Pauline*, a truly potent, image-filled and edgy love song.

While those (parental) vigils may be short, for me this down-home musical concoction possesses sustainable longevity. Could be Mr. Erelli's best yet, and just in case you're wondering I fully realise that demo versions of some of these songs appeared on the investor's bonus disc that accompanied DELIVERED. As I said, could be Mr. Erelli's best yet. **AH**
www.markerelli.com



twelve songs are created, I wouldn't argue with anybody who says that they could be the next big and celebrated British band. **RH**
www.myspace.com/awoodenbox

Andrew Bingham
A HOARDER WANTS TO GIVE
Self released
★★★★

A debut album with a highly rewarding and creative sound

A chance meeting with Phil Nicolò (a Grammy-winning producer who has worked alongside Dylan and Billy Joel to name a few) led to the recording of this album. Having spent years writing and performing songs for himself, Phil convinced Andrew that it was worth both their time putting Andrew's talent on record to share with the world. I'm damn appreciative of that meeting, as it has created something really beautiful here.

With an emotional feel to it, the album's title song is created in sparse surroundings but with a great groove. This certainly has a Greenwich Village sound about it which those who lived during the Summer of Love would find most appealing. Heck, I would even say that those who weren't even born during those hazy days could adore this song as much as I have. *Weak* begins tenderly with the simplest of arrangements, but is soon enriched by additional instrumentation which highlights Andrew's creativity. Like many great songs, its rhythm seems to embed itself in your psyche and never seems to let go. The concluding track of a record is not always the finest, but this does not happen in the case of this album. The picking on *Mine*, is reminiscent of Ravi Shankar and when combined with Andrew's vocals it should appeal to the most fickle of music fans.

It won't be long before the heads



of celebrated music companies will sit up and pay attention to what Andrew has to say. This Philadelphia artist is one whose career I will be paying close attention to. **RH**
www.andrewbinghammusic.com

Wrinkle Neck Mules
LET THE LEAD FLY.
Blue Rose BLU
CD0495
★★★★

Long awaited 4th album of old time lo-fi country music

What a great name for a band—the Wrinkle Neck Mules; and for some bizarre reason it really suits the music that they produce. Like a lot of Americana and folk bands these days, finding the finance to actually release *LET THE LEAD FLY* has meant that it has sat on the shelf since mid-2009. Was it worth the wait? ...Yes. You wouldn't expect anything new or experimental from a lo-fi band steeped in bluegrass and folk music but the formula certainly works here. There is guitar and banjo interplay a' plenty; the harmonies are especially sweet and the individual singing voices are never less than 'interesting.'

The Waters All Run Dry is a wonderfully crafted song with the singer's voice aching with unrequited passion as he tells the tale of his broken relationship over a jolly beat; conjuring up memories of Willie Nelson in the early 1980s. *Pleasure in the Absence of Pain* would have been a great title for the album and the song itself stands out like a poppy in a field of wheat, as the guys harmonise over a banjo and military style drumbeat.

If I have a criticism of *LET THE LEAD FLY*, it's that every time the Wrinkle Neck Mules threaten to enjoy themselves on *Catfish and Colour TVs* and *Before the Rise and Fall* they reel it back in and get all serious; which is a bit of a shame, as I think they could

be a great band to see play live. **AH**
www.wrinkleneckmules.com

Andy Smythe
BAND NATION OF THE FREE
Dreaming Element
Records DER 006
★★★★☆

In years to come, songs such as the ones found on this album will be studied in schools

This fourteen-track album is downright excellent and I dare anyone to dispute this claim. For anyone not to enjoy this record is downright impossible. Consisting of Les Elvin and Barry Targett along with Andy himself who penned all the songs, this London-based outfit flies the flag for British music proudly with one hell of an album.

With a classic rock and roll sound about it and contemporary groove, *Every White Line* allows Barry on electric guitar to be given free rein on a song which makes a harsh but deserved social commentary against those who deserve it most. What a delight it is to hear that he proves his worth and impresses from the start. With harmonica evident throughout in all its crowning glory, *Kids* allows the harp to be given a co-anchor along with the stonking guitar efforts in a collaboration which is wonderful to hear. With impressive violin efforts played in a romantic style (which is rather fitting due to its title) *Two Lovers* includes a great deal more instrumentations than other songs found on this record. This added inclusion of said violin along with the fine drumming contributes towards this track being one of the best Americana songs around at the moment.

Hopefully coming soon to a venue near you, this is one band which I hope to catch live in 2010 as some of their songs are ones I desperately want to hear in a gig setting. **RH**
www.andysmythe.com



Carolina Chocolate Drops
GENUINE NEGRO JIGS
Nonesuch Records.
516995
★★★★

Mix Race music with hillbilly, add pop-rock and what do you get? The Carolina Chocolate Drops!

Eclectic probably best sums up this excellent offering from the Carolina Chocolate Drops. It suits them more than blues or folk or country or as I've read a couple of times, 'revivalist'! They have taken old Race music (now known as blues) and hillbilly then adapted both genres to suit their modern style, adding songs of their own as well as a few other writers along the way. This album will help the modern music fan to become aware of and hopefully start investigating the history of what most definitely epitomises 'roots music.' Early country (or hillbilly as it was then known) had its roots in not only European music but also African. The history books tell us that many of the early millworkers, miners, etc. that took to playing guitar or banjo were as influenced by black musicians as they were white. The late Frank Hutchison was taught to play slide guitar by an old black blues player and Dock Boggs picked up banjo tips from another black musician in his young days. They were not unique in that regard either, there was a huge exchange of ideas and skills.

This band is Don Flemons on vocals, guitar and banjo, Justin Robinson plays banjo, jug, autoharp and vocals and Rhiannon Giddens on vocals and fiddle, although they are all multi-instrumentalists and do exchange instruments at times. They succeed in blending these old genres, that were only divided in the first place by commercialism and racism in the 1920s, with a variety of modern songs. The original versions

