

MUSIC CITY FREE TEXAS

#84 AUGUST 1996

LOOSE DIAMONDS

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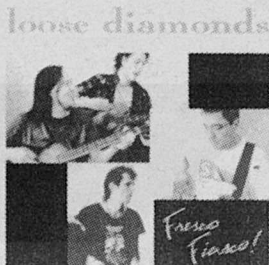


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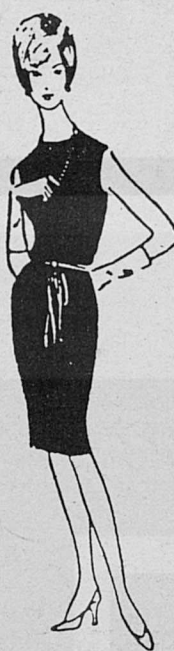
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SEVEN YEAR TWITCH

Seven years ago, Eve McArthur, Sylvia Benini and I brought forth upon this town a new magazine, conceived in frustration, and dedicated to the proposition that local music deserved better coverage than it was getting. At that time, I'd finished the book I came to Austin to write, was in no hurry to go back to England, loved the music I was hearing, was appalled by the local media and needed some way to pay the rent, a certain facility with words being my only vaguely marketable skill. The resulting concept of *Music City*, as it first called, found favor with Mesdames McArthur and Benini, so we lashed the first, virtually ad-free, issue together, stuck it on my Amex card and tossed it out of the nest to see if it would fly.

Seven years later, I guess I can conclude that MCT's basic philosophy, a blend of elitism and European-style principled intellectual rigor (or bloodmindedness), is, at the very least, viable. It turned out that there enough people who use the same Steinbergian map, on which Lubbock is the spiritual hub, New York and LA mere peripheral dots, and who comprehend irony, something I've learned is pretty alien to most Americans, to keep it going. There have, of course, been many changes, Eve and Sylvia went off on their own paths years ago, the mag's on its third format, still lacking any modicum of design bells and whistles, and the focus has been gradually expanded from Austin only to strictly Texas to national idiosyncratic (a polite word for eccentric), but while other music magazines have come and gone, and the *Statesman* and *Chronicle* have fluctuated wildly over the years, MCT has just kept soldiering on, consistent, if nothing else.

To be brutally honest, the essence of MCT is that I neither need nor seek anybody's approval, readers, artists or advertisers. As we say in England, "Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke" (this unofficial national motto originated with Royal Artillery gunners and Royal Air Force bombardiers—irony doesn't have to be subtle). If this sounds arrogant, criticism is not, or at any rate should not be, a popularity contest. While there are plenty of careerist whores, sycophantic celebrity worshippers, insecure chasers of The Next Big Thing and journalism school ignoramus muddying the waters, nationally and locally, my view is that if you're not willing to alienate people, you should switch to another line of work.

This is not to say I don't appreciate positive feedback, and there's one particular response, heard most recently from the legendary Sully Roddy of KNEW, San Francisco, and, therefore, particularly welcome, that always warms the cockles of my heart. As Roddy put it, "The thing I really appreciate about MCT is reading one of your reviews and thinking, 'Thank God, it isn't just me.'"

Back in 1989, I never really gave a thought to the future, apart from anything else, I didn't know how long I'd want, or be allowed, to stay in the States, but now I guess I, and MCT, are here for the duration and, fair warning, at this stage, I don't see either of us are going to change very much. The motto's still going to be, 'I don't care who you are, if you want a good review, you have to make a good record.' Having gone kinda national in coverage, I've occasionally thought of changing the magazine's title, and, pace Peter Blackstock's *No Depression*, one candidate is **No Concession**. JC

LOOSE DIAMONDS

Last month, I observed that the hallmark of a successful Austin band is that it rarely plays in Austin, and it would be hard to find a better example of this paradox than Loose Diamonds, who, sans day jobs, have racked up untold thousands of road and air miles in their quest for groceries and beer money in an eleven year history that can be conveniently divided into five periods, a sixth just opening. The story starts in 1985, when The Highwaymen were formed in Dayton, Ohio, but a flurry of early, ultimately illusory, success almost broke the band up, and this chapter ended when Troy and Mike Campbell, half-Korean, half-Kentuckian brothers, respectively singer and bass player, and their drummer, though not the guitarist, moved to Austin in 1989.

Hooking up with 'Scrappy' Jud Newcomb at an open mike ("a day that will live in infamy"), the Campbells were soon back in business as a punk-country rock & roll band in the mold of The True Believers, ie Very Very Loud. One of their regular venues was the long defunct Blue Bayou, where it was joked that the best seats in the house were on the other side of Congress Avenue. Though Troy's powerful, passionate voice and the melodic and rhythmic structures of his songs, gave them a definite cachet, the turning point for the band, lifting it to a different level, was the drummer's temporary defection in the summer of 1990 (according to Robin Shivers, he was, in true Austin style, the first of 11 drummers, but Jud says "I think it's been more like eight or nine. She's our manager, she wants everything to be bigger and better").

To keep their hand in, Troy and Jud started playing acoustic gigs and it became clear that sheer volume had drowned out the fact that, even by the standards of a time when Austin was uncommonly rich in exceptional singer-songwriters, Troy Campbell was an exceptional singer-songwriter, a discovery born out by **Live Texas Radio**, a cassette that, even though the Campbells and Newcomb have matured greatly as musicians in the meantime, still more than merits release on CD. Though they only lasted a few months, the Wednesday nights at El Chino (another long gone venue) were a defining experience. When The Highwaymen returned to electric stages, volume had given way to intensity, Campbell's new ambition being to play each song as if it were for the last time, rather than as loud as possible, an emphasis which won them #1 Rock Band in four consecutive MCT Polls.

The only non-original on the tape, which brought in significant touring work, was Jo Carol Pierce's *Buttons Of Your Skin* and, in the face of Willie Nelson et al's rival Highwaymen, Campbell took the title of another Pierce song as the band's new name (this relationship continued through Campbell's co-supervision of the Pierce tribute album, **Across The Great Divide**, and production of her own **Bad Girls Upset By The Truth**). As Loose Diamonds, the band then entered a new phase, by signing with dos Records, and while Campbell and Newcomb are reticent and formal about a relationship which resulted in two disappointing albums, saying "We're looking forward to the past and fondly to the future," dwelling on the learning experience ("every aspect of the business, good and bad"), and emphasizing the numerous European tours (five in two years, the most recent opening for Bob Dylan and Joe Ely at Italian festivals) the albums made possible, they rather revealingly describe the making of their first CD away from the label as "real cathartic."

The dos albums highlighted a shifting dynamic within the band. Initially, Troy Campbell was very much it's *raison d'être*, with Newcomb a promising, ever improving, sideman, but then Newcomb also started writing excellent songs, which, while the two see no reason why they shouldn't use each other's material, so far, he's always sung himself, now sharing the vocals almost 50-50 with Campbell. However, their voices are so disparate that Loose Diamonds often sounds like two different bands occupying the same space, and while some people may love both equally, many relate to one or the other (I understand the McLeese menage is deeply divided on this subject).

With their dos option up and the label in limbo, Loose Diamonds cut free and are more or less starting over, making demos to shop for a new label. "We'd like to do a lot more recording and have a little more control. With this record, we've found a good way for us to record, without too much thought, go in with fresh material and think on our feet, like cats. Next time, it'll be the same approach but with electric guitars." One can only pray that what, identity problem or no, ought by now to be firmly established as Austin's premier rock & roll band, doesn't wind up in the hands of another bunch of control freaks. JC

LOOSE DIAMONDS FRESCO FIASCO!

(Freedom, CD, FR1011)

Rather amazingly, a full two-thirds of Loose Diamonds' record sales have been in Europe and this album was originally conceived as a quickie acoustic EP to provide something new to feed that market while on tour this summer. Even with only seven tracks, they describe what they came up with as "our best record," and it's in seriously marked contrast to their dos albums, both in budget (Troy Campbell remarks, "They'd have been thrilled by the cost") and freewheeling approach ("We were learning the songs as we were cutting them"). Produced by guitarist Jud Newcomb, it makes a rather fascinating artistic statement by opening with Troy Campbell singing *I Know You*, by the reclusive Lubbock songwriter Al Strehli, which Jimmie Dale Gilmore sang on The Flatlanders album, and closing with Newcomb harmonizing behind Campbell on The Stanley Brothers' *Stone Walls & Steel Bars*. In between, Newcomb duets the soul classic *You Keep Me Hangin' On* with Toni Price, and sings his own *One Kiss Won't Hurt* and JM Robinson's *Blue Mood*, while Campbell adds *Suddenly*, which he and Newcomb co-wrote, and his own *Wearin' Away*. From the covers, particularly the brackets, you might well wonder what kind of outfit we're dealing with here, but, even acoustic, this is the truest picture since 1990's **Live Texas Radio** of the thinking person's rock & roll band. JC

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HONEST JOHN'S SMOKING SECTION

AUGUST BIRTHS & DEATHS

How I missed something so obvious is beyond me, but last month I clean forgot to up the number and date, so there were two consecutive '#82 June 1996' issues. Though I know the *Chronicle*, at least, has made the same mistake in the past, I felt less like an idiot when Austin Public Library rang to confirm that the second one was really the July issue and assured me it happens all the time, even with national publications. Still, that booboo's going to play merry hell with the index I've promised too many people I'm working on to weasel out of.

♦ The big news this month is The Return of **Chicago House!** Forced to close its Trinity Street home nine months ago, the seminal acoustic venue should be back in business by mid-August, though at this stage Peg Miller & Glynda Cox couldn't, or wouldn't, tell me where their new location is. I got the scoop, but not the details, dammit.

♦ You may have read where **Dale Watson** did a sound check at a Scottsdale, Arizona, club then came back at show time to find it wasn't there any more, having burned down, with all his equipment (apart from his treasured Les Paul) inside, in the interval. Courtesy of Jamie Hoover, a postscript comes from the story in a Phoenix paper, which demonstrates that The Rockin' Horse's **Tucker Woodbury** is a true prince among club owners. Having salvaged \$300 "in sopping \$5 and \$10 bills" from the till, Woodbury, standing in the burned out shell of his club, said "We paid them, even though they didn't get a chance to play. You can't have them going back and telling every band in Austin that they didn't get their money."

♦ DL and I spent most of July visiting my folks in Palo Alto and being thoroughly cured of lingering affection for the Bay Area, which, as we already detest El Lay, means that the best we can say for **California** is that you can keep it. We made a pact never to badmouth Austin drivers or traffic again—my dad says in the last couple of years he and my stepmother have flown to Moscow more often than they've driven to San Francisco, 30 miles away! Anyway, not only was I out of the Austin loop, but also didn't get to do a lot of music-related things I planned on, and which looked so easy on the map, so this month's a bit fragmented.

MARY CUTRUFELLO

♦ Passing through Lubbock, we picked up a copy of the infamous *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*, and found a brilliant example of its notorious indifference to music, especially local music. Detailing local Fourth of July celebrations, the paper simply noted that there would be "numerous bands." Muleshoe's a long way to go hear **Johnny Bush**, but at least they made sure anyone passing through would know he was playing. Unfortunately we were a few hours too early and on balance figured the irony of Bush honky tonking in a dry town could be enjoyed just as well over a cold beer in Santa Fe (we don't do dry very well).

♦ Looking for a new way to go west, we took it as a sign, if not an actual message from God, that US 50 runs through towns called **Ely** and **Austin**. Once on it, we discovered that it's also known as 'The Loneliest Highway In America,' a claim we're not about to argue. Anyway, we've now been to Ely, Nevada, and Austin, Nevada, and are absolved from ever having to do it again (though a slot machine in Ely took a liking to me and donated \$45 to the cause).

♦ Last time I was in California, the only live music I heard was Butch Hancock and Terry Allen at OT Price's, a very jolly joint in Santa Cruz, which closed its doors shortly after. This time, the only live music we got out to was Jo Carol Pierce at the **Great American Music Hall** in San Francisco, and if history repeats itself, that's alright with me. It's a wonderful room, but between the frosty self-important snootiness of the staff and what may well be the nastiest food in the Bay Area, we're in no hurry to go back. DL's reaction to the cheese fries reminded me irresistibly of Samuel Pepys' description in his Diaries of a meal as "So deadly foul I could not bear to look upon it."

♦ After being sucked into Oakland several times, we finally managed to fight our way to Berkeley's Telegraph Avenue, where I was amazed by two enormous independent record stores **Amoeba**, which MCT reader Esther Anderson describes as "my place of worship, The First Church of My Last Dollar," and **Rasputin** are almost next door to each other and *both of them* had more customers on a Sunday afternoon than all the record stores in Austin put together during simultaneous in-stores. Incredible sight.

who to love
and when to leave

♦ Channel-surfing the other day, I stumbled across a live Blues Brothers performance, which, even without Jake Blues, was worth pausing for, but I can't help wondering if the band knew that their show was sponsored by **Tylenol**.

♦ Thinking about Loose Diamonds' eleven drummers, I recall **Freddie Krc**, during his Wild Country days, asked who his new drummer was, saying "I don't bother remembering their names anymore."

♦ Sorry about two short issues in a row, ads thin out badly in the summer, but bear with me, as September will be back to full size, and I've already got a ton of good shit stacked up with lots more promised (we'll see).

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MARY CUTRUFELLO WHO TO LOVE & WHEN TO LEAVE

(independent cassette)

Couple of puzzles here, the date and the format. There was a time when Cutrufello was getting a fair amount of Next Big Thing publicity, usually along the lines of 'Gee whiz, a young black woman from Connecticut playing country!!' Whether it was moving to Houston or hooking up with a manager whose main talent was alienating people, that NBT buzz faded out and Cutrufello's Havoline Supremes became yet another country band on the buckets of blood circuit. Many years later than expected, her debut album isn't just a self-released cassette but very low budget, recorded live to ADAT and with zero frills, from which one assumes that no deal is even remotely in the offing. The unfortunate aspect of this is that Cutrufello, with a voice that's deep, gruff, even sexually ambiguous, has a real problem projecting her songs, and while the tape is clear enough to demonstrate conclusively that she can write terrific honky tonk songs, notably *Johnson Motel*, *I Didn't Even Get To Lose You*, *Black Maria* and *Sad Songs & Waltzes Revisited*, she needs a studio and a Lloyd Maines to really bring out this side of her talent. But if one could never make out the words at her live shows, there was another, compelling, reason to be there. Many country electric guitarists are as technically proficient and inventive as Cutrufello, but it's hard to think of another who comes close to her for fire and passion, and on that side, with Roland Denney on bass, Terry Kirkendall drums, her tape gives full measure. Currently playing with Jimmie Dale Gilmore (when Gilmore approached her, he asked if she'd be willing to play baritone guitar, his new album being drenched in it, and she'd just bought one the previous week!), Cutrufello has, overall, a much better album in her, but if you have to strain a little for the lyrics, you can sit back for some ultrahot, expressive guitar playing.

JC

EMILY KAITZ TERMINALLY TRENDY

(Pingleblobber, CD, 9601)

Over the last few years, Kaiz has put out five cassettes on her Pingleblobber label, and it's a measure of her songwriting invention that she hasn't raided the wealth of known crowd pleasers in her back catalog for her first CD (not counting the multi-artist *EmilyFest* tribute). Though she has her serious side, best represented here by *My Heart Hasn't Heard A Thing*, *In Love And Out Of This World* and *Christmas In California*, in which she demonstrates that she's a formidable and very underestimated songwriter, she's always been best known and loved for her pointed and versatile wit and once again the attention grabbers are the humorous songs. The most successful are the word play of *Small Medium At Large* ("Freedom was her predestiny") and *So Long Solange*, with Christine Albert doing her French thing, the white trash country love song *I Will Stay With You*, from the saccharine to the redneck with Ray Wylie Hubbard, the absurdist *Bob Dylan's 300 Game*, by LA (hence the earthquake reference, I guess) optometrist Andrew Lorand, the only non-original of the 12 songs, Jimmy LaFave guesting as the voice of The Zim, the ethnic humor of *Susie Rosen's Nose*, featuring the Austin Klezmorim, and the mordant autobiography (?) of *The Kerrville Song*. Perhaps even more than Austin's other musical comedians, The Austin Lounge Lizards and The Therapy Sisters, Kaiz's humor is remarkable in that it'll stand repeated listening, though it certainly doesn't hurt that she employs a galaxy of outstanding musicians, including Mary Reynolds, Mark Rubin, Danny Barnes, Darcy Deaville, Chip Dolan, Randy Glines, Herb Belofsky, Rich Harney, Marvin Dykhuis and Paul Glasse. As a footnote to the Dylan song, LaFave was in Duluth recently and actually met a guy who'd been in a high school bowling team with Bob!

JC

Lucky Strikes: Twelve Past Midnight—way cool, details next month.

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RECORD REVIEWS

ALPHONSE ARDOIN & CANRAY FONTENOT LA MUSIQUE CREOLE

(Arhoolie, CD, 445)

First released in 1967 on the Melodeon label (and later on Biograph), the first half of this CD is the finest example of old style la la, or authentic Creole, music, later transformed by Clifton Chenier and Boozoo Chavis into Zydeco, that one can find. Old style was generally an equal interplay of accordion and fiddle and is done superbly here by the celebrated partnership of 'Bois Sec' Ardoin and Fontenot. Sung entirely in French, the album is full of blues and French dance tunes reflecting their deeply personal hardships and joys. Joyous, rambunctious, melancholic, reflective and moody, it has it all. The second part, recorded by Chris Strachwitz in their home near Mamou, Louisiana, while in a slightly more modern setting, is still the ultimate old time Creole experience. Alphonse is a cousin of Amede Ardoin, the first Creole accordionist to document this Creole playing in his seminal 20s and 30s recordings, and is carrying the tradition, as he has from the early 60s. Unfortunately Canray Fontenot is no longer with us, having died in July of 1995. Truly, this CD is a must, an all platinum recording for its merits as a musical heritage of this lost, vast country we call home.

Steve Dean

ROSIE LEDET ZESTY ZYDECO

(Maison De Soul, CD, 1056)

First thing you have to notice is that Ledet is a young, female Zydeco button accordionist, singer and composer. Not a lot of them apples come to mind, Queen Ida, of course, being the first, perhaps last, thought. Next thing you notice is that four out of five of her band members are also Ledets (no liner notes to fill in the blanks, a common characteristic of these small, independent Louisiana labels). Then there's that unique, instantly identifiable and unforgettable voice. Mostly though, you have to notice the exuberance, fun-loving drive and danceability, prerequisites for any up and coming Zydeco band but which Ledet has in abundance. If she can retain that exuberance without falling prey to what Marc Savoy calls "acute cuteness" (which may, in her role as 'The Zydeco Sweetheart,' be driving her initial popularity), and keep drawing from the deep roots of the Zydeco tradition, then I foresee a long and healthy career for her. Too bad no one in Austin seems willing to build an audience for new generation Zydeco when performers like Ledet show it would be a great bet for the long haul.

Steve Dean

ROBERT JARDELL & PURE CAJUN

(Swallow, CD, SW-6127)

The story here is one reason Cajun music will survive forever while our urban landscape of broken families will be lucky not to explode tomorrow. Two of the members of this band are Guidreys, who grew up playing in the band led by their father, the accordionist Ozanne Guidrey, who also got Jardell started on that instrument. Jardell went on to play with the legendary Cajun master Dewey Balfa, which is, presumably, where he met the fiddle player, Milton Melancon, who also played with the Balfa brothers. A story, therefore, of three families and their close ties to family ways and their native music. And this band is as tight as a family can be, with many original tunes as well as borrowings from the Balfa songbook. Classic Cajun from the legendary Swallow Records, of Ville Platte, Louisiana, who have been bringing us the best of Cajun sounds since the 50s. In the old days, I knew it would be good whenever I saw that great, bright yellow Swallow label on those old 45s. The music's still great, it's just harder to see that little bird buried down in the left hand corner of a CD. Sign of the times, I guess, great music's still out there, it's just harder to find.

Steve Dean

JACKIE CAILLIER & THE CAJUN COUSINS FRONT PORCH CAJUN MUSIC

(Lanor, CD, LN-1055)

They may both trace their musical lineage back to the classic la la of Ardoin & Fontenoy, but while Rosie Ledet, in the direct line through Chavis and Chenier, is their spiritual granddaughter, Caillier represents the East Texas cousins who married out, assimilating Cajun to country by adding steel guitar and drums to the traditional brew of accordion and fiddle. As popular as ever, Country Cajun is very little known, mainly because it's concentrated in the jukejoints of the Golden Triangle (Port Arthur-Orange-Beaumont), and, still mostly sung in French, hasn't spread as much as mainstream Zydeco or Cajun. This CD is a splendid introduction to this dynamic sub-genre, a great, cohesive sound, with everyone involved making stellar contributions. If you're a fan of either contemporary Cajun or classic honky tonk then you'll dig this. I can't understand a word of French, in which this album is entirely sung, but then I don't speak Spanish either, which never stopped me from loving conjunto. As long as it's got that feeling, then it's in a language everyone should understand. These guys, whose *Cajun From Church Point* is a homage to Haggard's *Okie From Muskogee*, could rock The Broken Spoke.

Steve Dean

ANA EGGE

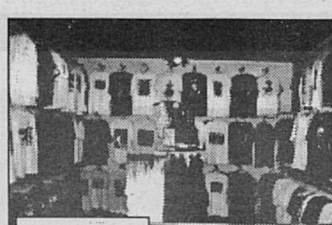


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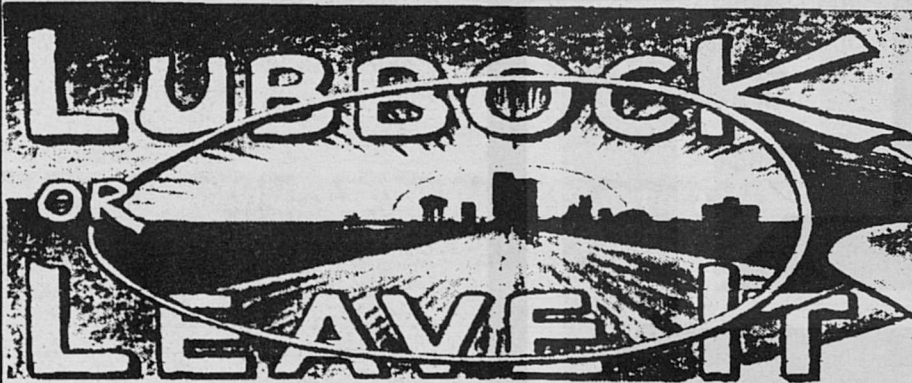
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