

statements mocking himself, the industry and individuals, especially with a cache of stronger songs. Not that they were now entirely bereft of significant treasures, however. The ironic and acerbic stampede of Big Star resides resplendently amid the dysfunctional SOUND OF LIES and SMILE lathers you in the gloriously beguiling yet slightly tart as ever slice of sunny 1970s lotion *I'm Gonna Make You Love Me*, brimful of the sort of stupefied optimism even Mike Scott or Julian Cope would sneer cynically at, while RAINY DAY MUSIC harked back to the by now lightly browned green grass outside an old town hall, still as ever a display of Louris' distinctive melodic sense.

With the second rarities disc here hopefully just hinting at the stockpile Louris has at his disposal to plunder and disperse amongst further two-disc reissues (alternate *Two Angels* titled *Old Woman From Red Clay*, the dour-garbed doppelganger of *I'm Gonna Make You Love Me* in the guise of *Someone Will* and *Stone Cold Mess* with lyrics that turned up on Smile just a trio of prizes for fans of such artefacts) this is one band that were a scarcity in their own time and would be a rare thing once again in being worthy of a reunion show or two. For now, this serves supremely thank you as both a perfect introduction to a mighty and arguably mite under-appreciated musical chapter as well as a tantalising appetiser for what's to come on any repackaged classics. Simply and elegantly astounding. **SG** www.jayhawksofficial.com

The Walkabouts
GOT NO CHAINS (THE SONGS OF THE WALKABOUTS)
Glitterhouse
GRDC698
★★★★

25th Birthday retrospective from founding fathers of alt.country

Where do I start with this album? Interesting? Eclectic? Brilliant?

Weird? GOT NO CHAINS is all and none of the above statements. Chris Eckman and Carla Torgerson formed the Walkabouts 25 years ago and have divided opinions ever since. What's not in doubt is that they have heavily influenced many commercial and successful alt.country, indie and Britpop bands during their career—hands up REM, Blur and even Radiohead in their early days.

GOT NO CHAINS is a double album made from one album of remastered versions of their 'hits' and a second album of the same songs recorded by friends and sycophants.

It's pointless debating the choice of songs that aren't here as the 15 original Walkabout songs that are here are pretty much the band's 'best of'. *Grand Theft Auto* gets the proceedings off to a great start with enough buzz-saw guitars and growling vocals to make your nose bleed. Title song *Got No Chains* must surely have been the template for every alt.country album that ever followed it? Please feel free to debate that suggestion.

When Chris and Carla drop down

into duet territory with *Cold Eye*, *Nightbirds*, and *Sundowner* Nick Cave and Kylie should blush with embarrassment, as they used this exact same formula years later to resurrect the Australian lady's career with their 'Murder Ballads.' *Nights Between Stations* is a forgotten gem and reminded me of the best of Dolly and Porter's duets in the 'Golden Age of Country.' Carla is allowed a couple of solo outings on this retrospective; the beautiful and delicate *Unholy Dreams* which is one of the sexiest songs ever; with the passion only ever being alluded to by a lonely desperate woman and *The Light Will Stay On* which is the best song Lucinda Williams never recorded.

The other album is a set of covers of the songs in the same running order. As usual on this type of thing, some songs work—Terry Lee Hale turns *Got No Chains* into a country standard, Willard Grant make *This Rotten Tree* sound like their own song and Jon Langford is Jon Langford on *Christmas Valley*. The rest are pretty forgettable. If I'd been involved in the launch of this collection I'd have advised a double album of original Walkabout songs as there is enough quality material to fill two albums. **AH** www.thewalkabouts.com

Thomas Dybdahl
LAST SUPPA
★★

Yaaaaaaawn

This album is a compilation of the best of Thomas Dybdahl's four previous albums. In Norway, Dybdahl's home country, he has been compared to 'Tim Buckley, Nick Drake and other forward-thinking songwriters.' If that draws you in, read no further. It's hyperbole of the worst kind. The comparison deeply flatters Dybdahl's mediocre brand of inoffensive nu-folk acoustic musings. That he has won a number of awards in his home country, including a Norwegian Grammy, serves only to steer me clear of further investigation into Norway's middle-of-the-road acoustic scene.

Dybdahl's usual vocal sound is a whispery affair, with a slightly strained delivery for maximum effect, just to really grind out the 'emotion.' His range goes from a Jeff Buckley-esque falsetto on *From Grace* (coincidental title, Jeff fans?) to a laughable quasi-Vegas Elvis during the chorus of *Cecilia*. Lyrically, it's mostly love and its accompanying highs and lows. That English isn't his native tongue makes this a little more forgivable, although titles such as *I Need Love Baby*, *Love, Not Trouble* do little to garner sympathy. On the latter song, he begins with a low-down rumbling vocal that really brings home the total lack of any individual definition. It could well be a different artist. That this is compiled from the 'best' of four albums confirms only boring consistency. Dybdahl accompanies his vocals with either lightly strummed acoustic or gentle finger-picking. Arrangement-wise it's mostly standard fare, brushed drums and bass, etc. The band and songwriting

are at their best on the final song, *Rise In Shame*, which is ruined by Dybdahl doing an impersonation of Antony Hegarty.

Described as 'irresistibly serene' on the accompanying press bump, this is undoubtedly Dybdahl's biggest problem: its complete lack of edge. Not once do you feel the slightest frisson, the merest ruffle. There are occasional moments that lift above the dullness that pervades every song, such as the beautiful pedal steel on the appallingly titled *B A Part*. Sadly, they're few and far between. This is pedestrian music for pedestrian people. **SM** www.thomasdybdahl.com

Various
KEEP THE LIGHT ALIVE: CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF LOWEN & NAVARRO
AIX Records
★★★★

Friends and acquaintances reprise Lowen & Navarro's song catalogue

AIX Records is a Los Angeles based media group that for the past decade has been recording and releasing high-end DVD-Audio/Video Discs in numerous genres of music. Their association with Eric Lowen and Dan Navarro began with *CARRY ON TOGETHER* (2005) and continued with *PIECES OF TIME SPENT* (2007). Having formed a songwriting partnership in the early 1980s, the pair began performing in public during 1987. On March 17, 2004, Eric was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis otherwise known as Lou Gehrig's disease. With Eric's condition progressively worsening in recent years, the duo played their final show at the Birchmere in Alexandria, Virginia on June 6 last year.

CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF LOWEN & NAVARRO: KEEP THE LIGHT ALIVE is the first AIX compact disc release, but unlike their DVD/DVD-Audio releases the songs weren't recorded in AIX's studios. I own a few AIX DVDs, and the sound quality is stunning. Where, to my ears, this CD sounds crystal clear, AIX point out that it may not match their own exacting audio standards. Based on their working relationship and friendship with the duo, AIX's aim in releasing KEEP THE LIGHT ALIVE is to raise public awareness of this degenerative condition, as well as financially support the Eric Lowen Trust and a few ALS-related charities.

Once word spread of Lowen's enforced retirement, numerous music business friends and acquaintances stepped up to the plate with offers of help. The result is thirteen Lowen & Navarro songs performed by an all star cast. Jackson Browne opens the proceedings with *Weight Of The World* with a Severin Browne harmony vocal and, later, younger brother Severin reprises *Open Your Heart*. The Bangles' Michael Steele penned a song with the duo that the band included on *EVERYTHING* (1988), and here Susanna Hoffs takes the lead vocal on their interpretation of *We Belong*. The song, a number 5 pop hit for Pat Benatar back in 1984 was subsequently nominated for a Best Pop Vocal

Performance, Female Grammy.

Other contributors to this worthy tribute recording include John Ondrasik of Five For Fighting, Keb' Mo', Joel Rafael (a great reading of *Old Riverside*), the Refugees (Wendy Waldman, Cindy Bullens and Deborah Holland) assisted by Kenny Edwards, Freebo aided vocally by Eliza Gilkyson, and Eddie From Ohio. **AW** <http://www.keepthelightalive.org/>

The Browns
A COUNTRY MUSIC ODYSSEY
Bear Family BCD
16533 AH
★★★★

Smoothest harmonies in 1950s country

I have to say that I was never a fan of the Browns. During the 1950s and 1960s, Jim Ed Brown and his sisters Maxine and Bonnie offered up some of the smoothest harmonies heard in country music. At times it was as sweet and saccharine-coated as Britain's Miki & Griff—an act that I really detested. In fact, the British duo took great delight in recording songs that the Browns had originally recorded. But now, sitting here listening to this thirty-six track collection, I have to say that in amongst some quite awful easy-listening dross, there's some pretty good examples of smoothly executed country music gems.

The trio was professionally formed around 1953, though of the course the siblings had been singing together for most of their young lives. Initially a duo of Jim Ed and Maxine, they enjoyed their first hit with the catchy *Looking Back To See* which hit the American country top ten in the summer of 1954. Younger sister Bonnie joined the following year and the hits just kept a-coming—*Here Today And Gone Tomorrow*, *I Take The Chance*, *I Heard the Bluebirds Sing*, *Beyond the Shadow* and their real biggie, *The Three Bells* which topped both the country and pop charts in 1960. The latter song was more folk than country and they maintained that style with *Scarlet Ribbons* and *The Old Lamplighter*. But they also recorded cowboy ballads (*Cool Water*), slow tunes (*They Call the Wind Maria*), pop songs (*Rhythm of the Rain*) and gospel tunes (*When They Ring Those Golden Bells*). When they stayed close to pure country as with *I Heard the Bluebirds Sing* (Chet Atkins guitar can be clearly heard alongside Tommy Jackson's fiddle and Bob Foster's steel), the infectious *Ground Hog*, *Down on the Old Plantation* (Hank 'Sugarland' Garland providing some fine guitar pickin') and *I'm In Heaven* (Jimmy Day playing the distinctive pedal steel) they were very much in a class of their own.

In late 1967, the Browns disbanded and Maxine and Bonnie went back to raise their families, while Jim Ed focused on the successful solo career he had started in 1965. As with all these Bear Family compilations there are extensive sleeve notes and rare photos with a full discography. Seek out and enjoy. **AC** www.bear-family.de

