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THE SUNDOWNERS

#84/173 JANUARY 2004



FAR & Away: The Best of 2003

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† GARY STEWART

FREEFORM AMERICAN ROOTS #53

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— Chris Davis, The Memphis Flyer

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— Nightflying Magazine, Little Rock, AR

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JOHN THE REVEALATOR

By now, you're probably sick to death of 'Best Of 2003' lists but who am I to buck a venerable media tradition? Anyway, this is my and the FAR team's chance to give some recognition to the people who won't get much anyplace else. Also, this is as close as I come to taking a vacation, so get over it.

Before we get listing, if you don't have a wall calendar yet, or even if you do, **Cheapo Discs**, Austin, have a great one of retro cheesecake pix by George Brainard, featuring our very own Ms **Martí Brom** as Miss May. Try www.cheapotexas.com.

JC's BEST OF 2003

ALBUMS OF THE YEAR

- 1 **Anna Fermin's Trigger Gospel: Oh, The Stories We Hold** (Undertow)
- 2 **Chip Taylor & Carrie Rodriguez: The Trouble With Humans** (TMG)
- 3 **Ray Wylie Hubbard: Growl** (Philo)
- 4 **Ronny Elliott: Hep** (Blue Heart)
- 5 **Martí Brom: Wise To You** (Goofin')
- 6 **Jo Serrapere & The Willy Dunns: Tonight At Johnny's Speakeasy** (Detroit Radio)

DEBUT ALBUMS

- 1 **Halden Wofford & The Hi-Beams** (Hi-Beams)
- 2 **Eric Westbury: Burnt Tongues & Blue Truths** (Barreltown)
- 3 **Graham Lindsey: Famous Anonymous Wilderness** (Catamount)

VA/TRIBUTE ALBUM

- 1 **HUAC** [Hot Unsigned Americana Compilation] (Catamount)
- 2 **Jon Langford & The Pine Valley Cosmonauts: The Executioner's Last Songs Vols 2 & 3** (Bloodshot)
- 3 **Lonesome, Ornry & Mean; A Tribute To Waylon Jennings** (Dualtone)

REISSUE/HISTORIC ALBUM

- 1 **Bill Neely: Austin's Original Singer-Songwriter** (Lost Art)
- 2 **Thomas Fraser: Long Gone Lonesome Blues** (Nel Music)
- 3 **The Sundowners: Chicago Country Legends** (Bloodshot Revival)

FEMALE ARTIST

- 1 **Carrie Rodriguez** 2 **Anna Fermin** 3 **Martí Brom**

MALE ARTIST

- 1 **Bobby Flores** 2 **John Lilly** 3 **Howard Kalish**

SONGWRITER

- 1 **Chip Taylor** 2 **Anna Fermin** 3 **Ronny Elliott**

BEST IN THE INDUSTRY

- 1 **Gurf Morlix** 2 **Henry Horenstein** 3 **Catamount Records**

LOOSE DIAMONDS

A DJ's PRIVATE STASH; #1 PROFESSOR PURPLE

First time I met legendary British DJ Charlie Gillett, I thanked him for turning me on to what is still an all-time favorite album, the eponymous **Bobby Charles**, and he told me that I was the missing piece and he now knew personally everybody in the UK who'd bought a copy. He'd played it over and over, reviewed it everywhere he could and talked it up endlessly but at the end of the day this masterpiece had sold a few hundred copies nationwide.

A sobering thought for any writer or DJ, but most all of us have been there, going evangelical over albums that knock us sideways but which, inexplicably as far as we're concerned, simply fail to click. When Richard Schwartz, aka Professor Purple, host of *Amarillo Highway*, KZMU, Moab, UT, suggested something along the lines of 'Albums I wish I could have got more people to buy' as a FAR & Away category, I dismissed the notion out of hand because it would have meant running a staggeringly long list of obscure records (trust me on this, I know my guys).

Still, the idea resonated for obvious reasons, so, replacing the sporadic *FAR DJ Of The Month* dealie, this will be a regular spot where FAR DJs will get another chance to beat the drum for their neglected faves (* means still available). And Richard gets to kick it off. Professor Purple says, check 'em out:

Catherine Britt: Dusty Smiles And Heartbreak Cures (ABC [Australia]) *

Cow: Feeding Time (Trikont [Germany]) *

Patsy Montana & The Prairie Ramblers: The Very Early Patsy Montana (Cattle LP)

Ranch Romance: Western Dream (Ranch Hand)

The Reedy Buzzards (Self released) *

Jerry Rigged: Piano (Self released) *

Mingo Saldivar: The Dancing Cowboy Sings Country (Hacienda) *

Sidesaddle & Co: The Girl From The Red Rose Saloon (Faultline) *

Joe West & The Sinners: Jamie Was A Boozer (Frogville) *

CHARLES EARLE's B-Sides

A BLIP ON THE RADAR

Formerly All Over the List of Nominees,

Music Row is Now Scarce on Grammy Night

December is a boring month in the music business for Nashville. It always has been. I remember my days of working on Music Row, when it was a long, tedious exercise in receiving tour sweatshirts and food platters from artists we represented. Other than the guys working putrid Christmas albums and 'best of' compilations, most folks in the industry are twiddling their thumbs.

However, due to the fact that the 2004 Grammy telecast has been moved up a few weeks to the beginning of February, Music Row got an early Christmas gift in the form of the nominees list. Believe me, these folks have gotten better gifts in their day. All you need to know in order to get the picture is that Ricky Scaggs was the Nashville's most nominated artist. Ouch!

It hasn't been that long ago since Music Row was getting artists in the major categories on Grammy night. Faith Hill, Shania Twain and the like earned nominations for Album of the Year, Best Pop Female Vocal Performance, etc... We also used to get a Nashville act into the Best New Artist category now and then. But in recent years Nashville hasn't managed any appearances in the big categories, and has often seen country nods go to artists like Lyle Lovett, who have virtually no ties whatsoever to Nashville.

So how did Music Row fare this year? Well, not bad in terms of nominations, but we'll have to see who takes home the trophies. Lovett and fellow Texan Ray Benson are nominated against a bunch of Nashville's usual suspects in the Male Country Vocal category, and either could take home the hardware. Likewise, Dolly Parton and the late June Carter Cash could send a few of Nashville's divas home unhappy that evening. And wouldn't it be fun to see Pat Green win in an upset over a bunch of country chart hits in the Country Song category? These kinds of things have happened many times before, as people from all over the industry are voting. Nashville hasn't had much luck stuffing the ballot boxes on Grammy night.

Also, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the handful of nominations given to the late Warren Zevon for the **The Wind**, an album he released just before his death in 2003. Zevon is without question one of my songwriting heroes. I had the pleasure of seeing him live a handful of times and many of his 20 and 25 year old songs still thrill me as if they were new. Was he nominated simply as a result of his death? Absolutely. Does that bother me? Not at all. He had a gift that deserves to be heard and celebrated. So tune in February 8 and see if Zevon gets some much-deserved recognition.

THE SLUMP CONTINUES

The final Soundscan sales figures for the record industry in 2003 are out, and there is good news for pop music even as we are looking at some seriously bad news for Nashville.

Apparently the threat of lawsuits for downloading music illegally may have been just the thing needed to stop the bleeding in pop. While sales figures for the genre have dropped significantly in recent years, the 2003 numbers showed a decline over last year of less than 1%. Just holding steady is a major accomplishment these days. And while it may take a few years to see if a reduction in internet piracy is the reason for steady sales, it certainly would seem to make sense. Whatever the reason, you can bet that a lot of folks in New York and LA are breathing easier.

Music Row, however, was not happy about the sales figures. County music sales were down 10% in 2003 versus those of 2002 (and they would seem even worse were it not for the fact that *Billboard* counted the Elvis Presley **30 #1 Hits** compilation as a country record). In fact, the only Music Row artist to put an album in the overall top 10 for sales in 2003 was Toby Keith. One industry analyst was quoted in our local daily paper as saying, "I think we're about as close to the bottom as we're going to get."

Harsh words indeed, considering how bad things had gotten in recent years. However, as they always do, a number of industry types here in town are pointing to reasons for optimism in 2004. The first thing they mention is that Kenny Chesney, Clint Black and LeAnn Rimes all have new records during the first few months of this year. This hardly seems reason for any Row execs to buy vacation homes to me, but they have to find something to feel good about. It has also been noted that Faith Hill should have a new album out this year that features a return to more of a country sound. Her last album, **Cry**, tanked in comparison to her previous releases. But since outlets such as VH1 and pop radio ignored Faith this last time around, she's apparently going to come back to country fans with her tail between her legs.

So what will the final numbers for 2004 look like? Personally, I'm not very optimistic. I don't see artists like LeAnn Rimes or Clint Black doing a whole lot for the industry. Chesney may sell some records, but I wouldn't figure on more than three million or so. And Faith Hill's numbers will once again be limited without having the massive exposure from pop outlets. If hers is the biggest record of this year, I would guess that we lose another 5% in sales for 2004, proving that we haven't hit bottom yet.

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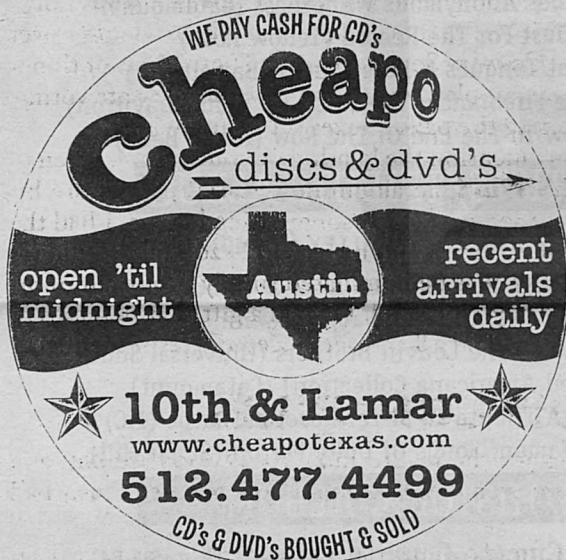


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FREEFORM AMERICAN ROOTS #53

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#1 RICK SHEA & PATTY BOOKER: OUR SHANGRI-LA

(Tres Pescadores) *B&C/*CP/*DB/*EW/*MM/*PP/*TA

- 2 The Sundowners: Chicago Country Legends (Bloodshot Revival) *DC/*JZ/*SH
- 3 Paul Burch: Fool For Love (Bloodshot) *TW
- 4 Lauren Sheehan: Some Old Lonesome Day (self) *JH/*SMJ/*TF
- 5 Graham Lindsey: Famous Anonymous Wilderness (Catamount) *JCS/*SJ/*TO
- 6 Chris Stuart & Backcountry: Saints & Strangers (Backcountry) *EB/*FW
- 7 Johnny Cash: Unearthed (American/Lost Highway) *MB/*RC/*RH
- 8 Jerry Sires Band: You're Gonna Be Cold (self)
- 9 Eric Westbury: Burnt Tongues & Blue Truths (Barreltown) *FM
- 10 John Lilly: Last Chance To Dance (self) *DWT
- 11 Anna Fermin's Trigger Gospel: Oh, The Stories We Hold (Undertow) *GS/*TJ
- 12= Martí Brom: Wise To You (Goofin') *RMS
- Merle Haggard: Like Never Before (Hag) *DT/*S&D
- 13 Wanda Jackson: Heart Trouble (CMH) *DP
- 14 Bottle Rockets: Blue Sky (Sanctuary)
- 15 VA: Livin' Lovin' Losin'; Songs Of The Louvin Brothers (Universal) *LG
- 16= David Childers & The Modern Don Juans: Room #23 (Silver Meteor) *RE
- Billy Joe Shaver: Try And Try Again (Compadre) *MA/*T&L
- 17 Robert Earl Keen: Farm Fresh Onions (Koch) *LW/*TT
- 18 Hot Club Of Cowtown: Continental Stomp (Hightone)
- 19 Mercy Brothers: Strange Adventure (Gibraltar) *DA
- 20= Deke Dickerson: Mr Entertainment (Rock & Roll Inc) *RS
- Chris Knight: The Jealous Kind (Dualtone) *FS
- 21= Steve Earle: Just An American Boy (Artemis) *DY
- Darrell Scott: Theatre Of The Unheard (Full Light) *JB
- Kelly Willis & Bruce Robison: Happy Holidays (Boars Nest) *TH
- 22= Tom Adler: Jenny Where You Going (Coal Holler) *MF
- Rosie Flores: Single Rose (Durango Rose) *AR
- Jack Ingram: Live At Billy Bob's Texas (Smith Group) *WR
- Albert Lee: Heartbreak Hill (Sugar Hill) *KD
- 23 Ruthie & The Wranglers: Someday (Lasso) *MDT
- 24= Blind Boys of Alabama: Go Tell It On The Mountain (Realworld) *TG
- Richard Fontaine: Post To Wire (El Cortez) *OS
- The Mavericks (Sanctuary) *TS
- 25= An American Starlet: The Duchess Of Hazard (Starlet's Web) *MD
- Blackstone Valley Sinners: The Cold Hard Truth About Christmas (Valley) *3RC
- Cave Catt Sammy: Whiskey And The Devil (Rubric) *BC
- Roger Creager: Long Way To Mexico (Dualtone) *RR
- Richard Dobson: A River Will Do (Brambus) *DJ
- Charlotte Greig: Winter Woods (Harmonium) *KG
- Caroline Herring: Wellspring (Blue Corn) *NA
- The Hunger Mountain Boys : Fashioned In The Old Way (self) *BR
- Duane Jarvis: Delicious (Slewfoot) *CD
- Lafayette Rhythm Devils: Pray For Us (Z'Affaire) *JF
- Delbert McClinton: Live (New West) *CM
- Davis Raines: Parts Unknown (Shell Point) *CL
- Dan Reeder (Oh Boy) *SC
- Chris Scruggs: Honky Tonkin' Lifestyle (DIY) *MT
- Michael Smith & Jamie O'Reilly: The Gift Of The Magi (Bird Avenue) *MR
- Ove Støylen: Dusty Boots (KS) *RW
- VA: Cold Mountain (Columbia) *ST

FAR & AWAY THE BEST OF 2003

ALBUMS OF THE YEAR

#1 CHIP TAYLOR & CARRIE RODRIGUEZ: THE TROUBLE WITH HUMANS

(Trainwreck/Lone Star)

- 2 Rick Shea & Patty Booker: Our Shangri-LA (Tres Pescadores)
- 3 Ray Wylie Hubbard: Growl (Philo)
- 4 Dwight Yoakam: Population Me (Audium)
- 5 John Lilly: Last Chance To Dance (self)
- 6 Caexico: Feast of Wire (Quarterstick)
- 7 Rodney Crowell: Fate's Right Hand (DMZ)
- 8 Wayne Hancock: Swing Time (Bloodshot)
- 9 Paul Burch: Fool For Love (Bloodshot)
- 10 Cornell Hurd Band: Live At Jovita's (Behemoth)
- 11 Drive By Truckers: Decoration Day (New West)
- 12 Martí Brom: Wise To You (Goofin')
- 13 Bobby Flores: Just For The Record (Yellow Rose)
- 14 Greg Trooper: Floating (Sugar Hill)
- 15 Ronny Elliott: Hep (Blue Heart)

DEBUT ALBUM

#1 HALDEN WOFFORD & THE HI-BEAMS (Hi-Beams)

- 2 Graham Lindsey: Famous Anonymous Wilderness (Catamount)
- 3 Bobby Flores: Just For The Record (Yellow Rose)
- 4 Eric Westbury: Burnt Tongues & Blue Truths (Barreltown)
- 5 Elizabeth McQueen & The Firebrands: The Fresh Up Club (Gravitron)
- 6 Adrienne Young: Plow To The End Of The Row (Addie Belle)

VARIOUS ARTISTS/TRIBUTE ALBUM

#1 JON LANGFORD & THE PINE VALLEY COSMONAUTS:

THE EXECUTIONERS' LAST SONGS VOLS 2 & 3 (Bloodshot)

- 2 Lonesome On'ry And Mean; A Tribute To Waylon Jennings (Dualtone)
- 3 Livin' Lovin' Losin': Songs Of The Louvin Brothers (Universal South)
- 4 HUAC [Hot Unsigned Americana Collection] (Catamount)
- 5 Shout, Sister, Shout; A Tribute To Sister Rosetta Tharpe (MC)
- 6 Just Because I Am A Woman; Songs Of Dolly Parton (Sugar Hill)

REISSUE/HISTORIC ALBUM

#1 THE SUNDOWNERS: CHICAGO COUNTRY LEGENDS (Bloodshot)

- 2 Willie Nelson: Crazy; The Demo Sessions (Sugar Hill)
- 3 Freda & The Firedogs (Plug)
- 4 Waylon Jennings: Waylon Live; The Expanded Edition (BMG)
- 5 Bill Neeley: Austin's Original Singer-Songwriter (Lost Art)
- 6 Thomas Fraser: Long Gone Lonesome Blues (Nel)

FEMALE ARTIST

#1 MARTÍ BROM

- 2 Carrie Rodriguez
- 3 Lucinda Williams
- 4 Gillian Welch
- 5 Audrey Auld
- 6 Anna Fermin

MALE ARTIST

#1 JOHNNY CASH

- 2 Ray Wylie Hubbard
- 3 John Lilly
- 4 Paul Burch
- 5 Dwight Yoakam
- 6 Bobby Flores

SONGWRITER

#1 CHIP TAYLOR

- 2 Ray Wylie Hubbard
- 3 Rodney Crowell
- 4 Tom Russell
- 5 Paul Burch
- 6 Ronny Elliott

BEST IN THE INDUSTRY

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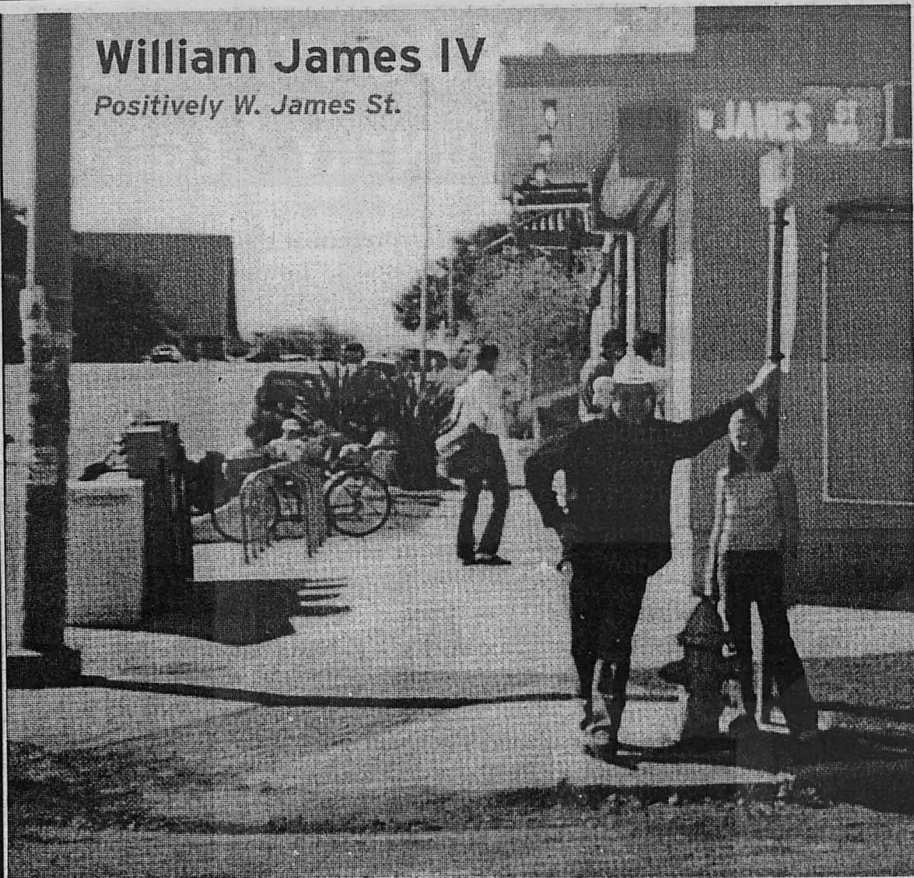
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*XX = DJ's Album of the Month

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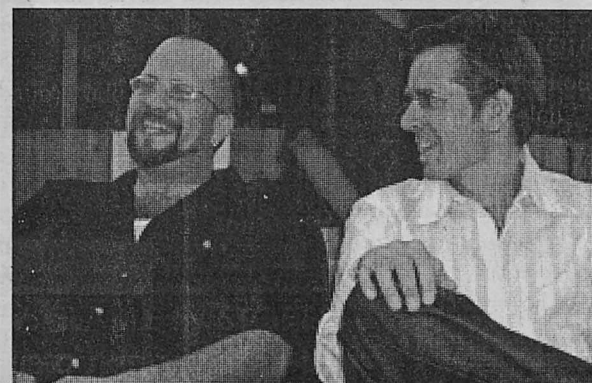
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REVIEWS CODE

***** Killer

***** What's not to like?

**** Must try harder

*** Why did they bother?

** Piss on this noise

? I don't get it

R.I.P. GARY STEWART

Some of you may be too young to remember this, and may find it hard to believe, but there was a time, not all that long ago, when major labels put out some really great honky tonk music. You can almost put a date on when that ended—Lee Clayton was at Capitol from 1973 to 1981, Gene Watson and Jessi Colter both from 1975 to 1981, Joe Ely's first stint at MCA, with the real Joe Ely Band, was from 1977 to 1981 and Gary Stewart, lasting only a year longer despite being far more successful, was with RCA from 1975 to 1982.

Born May 28th, 1945, in Letcher County, KY, Stewart was raised in Fort Pierce, FL, which remained his home base until Tuesday, December 16th, when he shot himself, shortly after his wife of 43 years died. Working in an airplane factory and singing in local bars, he started writing and pitching songs in the late 60s, catching the attention of Mel Tillis and Jerry Bradley. He moved to Nashville and though his recordings on small labels went nowhere and he was playing piano in Charlie's Pride's Plainsmen, his songs were cut by Stonewall Jackson, Billy Walker, Cal Smith, Nat Stuckey, Jim Ed Brown and others, and he could well have flourished simply as a songwriter—at one point in 1971, four songs in the country Top 10 were his work. However, on becoming RCA's Nashville VP, Bradley signed Stewart and in 1973 released his single, *Drinkin' Thing*, which initially flopped but, when reissued in 1974, hit the Top Ten.

In 1975 Stewart and RCA unleashed one of the greatest country albums ever made, **Out Of Hand**, which yielded the #1 hit single *She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)*. Stewart made six more albums for RCA, none of which rose to the same heights, artistically or in the record stores, though **Your Place Or Mine** came close. However, one of his early singles was *Ramblin' Man*, the Allman Brothers, not Hank Williams, and he graphically illustrated his dual allegiances with **Cactus And A Rose**, which, featuring members of the Allman Brothers and Bonnie Bramlett, unfortunately provided proof positive that there wasn't much call for a honky tonk/Southern rock fusion.

Perhaps trying to turn Stewart's reputation for drug abuse and hard drinking excess to some advantage, RCA then teamed him up with another notorious lush, Dean Dillon, for two dreadful good ol' boozing country boys albums which, as one writer put it, "made the redneck rowdiness of Hank Williams Jr sound philosophical by comparison," after which they cut him loose. Returning to Fort Pierce, Stewart reemerged in 1988, clean and sober but with enough of the same high energy, on Hightone, with whom he made three albums. Indeed, his last album, **Live At Billy Bob's Texas** (Smith Music Group *****), recorded in 2003 and released not long before his death, demonstrates that, almost 30 years after his glory days, he could still outsing not just his contemporaries but pretty much any honky tonk singer you care to name.

Today the epithet "too country for rock, too rock for country" is all too often worn as smug, self-congratulatory badge of pride, but Gary Stewart, its poster boy, was one of the first to discover, the hard way, that it was a recipe for commercial disaster. With his huge, vibrato-laden tenor, which sounds like a cross between Hank Williams lonesome and Jerry Lee Lewis fire and brimstone, he made one of the truly classic country albums, and even his lesser work was better than anything that's come out of Nashville since 1981.

JC

THE SUNDOWNERS CHICAGO COUNTRY LEGENDS

(Bloodshot Revival *****.5)

King Alfonso X once said "Had I been present at the creation of the world I would have proposed some improvements," however, as honky tonks and country music weren't real big in 13th century Spain, I doubt El Sabio would have tabled my suggestion—not just a good saloon in every single town but a good country band in every one of them. From the reactions of visiting friends and touring musicians, it's clear that bars like Casbeers are as rare as bands like The Starline Rhythm Boys, so if you've ever been lucky enough to hit the combo, for instance getting to see Don Walser & The Pure Texas Band any Monday night at Henry's, well, all I can say is that the Good Lord must have taken a liking to you. As he did to people who got to Barney's Ringside Ranch, aka Bar Double RR, in downtown Chicago, where The Sundowners played most every night for almost 30 years.

Reminiscent Chicagoans provide some interesting parallels between the two joints. Bloodshot Records' Rob Miller echoed the famous graffito, 'I dreamed I went to Heaven. It wasn't as good as Henry's.' "The first time I visited Chicago, a friend said 'You've got to see this place.' We walked down the stairs and it was like walking into a home you didn't even know you'd been missing. The Sundowners played all night, the beer was cold and it seemed like heaven." Another Bloodshot founder, Eric Babcock, recalls an analogue to Henry's wildly diverse but amicable crowd. "White collar Loop-cubicle escapees, curiosity seeking college kids, slumming suburbanites, indie rock dilettantes and, of course, all species of displaced country mice looking to reconnect. The magic trick was The Sundowners' capacity to make all these disparate factions feel equally at home."

And like Don Walser & The Pure Texas Band, lead guitarist Don Walls, acoustic rhythm guitarist Bob Boyd, and bassplayer Curt Delaney didn't just play standards, they set and shared them. As John T Rice, who produced this album and put a band together for Don when he first visited Chicago, says, "Walser and The Sundowners had the same goal, to help create the next generation of the Country Tradition."

"If you wanted to play music, they wanted to play it with you. If you were a musician, it was almost mandatory that you joined them onstage. The band provided an excellent training ground for young country musicians; every new apprentice walked away with a clearer concept of 'taste' and 'repertoire.' The most important thing musicians learned on their stage was to be flexible and willing to learn new material on the spot. Regular jam sessions allowed younger players to meet and form bands of their own."

A notable beneficiary of Sundowners largesse was Jon Langford. "On The Mekons' first tour of the States, we stumble into the Double RR and Bob Boyd invites us up to play a few numbers!!! Don Walls stays and plays with us, his beautiful fluid guitar lines acting like a powerful glue to hold us together and pass our racket off as something the regulars can tolerate. He smiles encouragingly and doesn't seem alarmed by how crap we are. Maybe he recognizes some kindred spirit, maybe we're all just smashed. When I moved to Chicago, they'd always asked me up to play, which was flattering, scary and ultimately educational. Getting onstage and singing with The Sundowners in front of a crowd of mean and inebriated genuine Americans meant tangible vindication, a rite of passage."

Originally Curley Coldiron's Circle C Boys, Walls, from Logan, W Virginia, Boyd, from Chattanooga, TN, and Delaney, from Albany, GA, became The Sundowners (from the Robert Mitchum movie, right there what's not to like?) when Coldiron retired in 1959, taking over his residency and playing at the same club, though it moved from N Clark to W Madison to W Randolph, four or five nights a week until 1989 when, just like Henry's, the Double RR lost its lease and the building was razed. Walls suffered a debilitating stroke in the early 90s, Delaney died in 1997 and Boyd in 2000.

Until now there was little, apart from rare Circle C 45s and an LP (of songs by Chicago songwriters), to show for the trio's long reign as kings of Chicago country. Bloodshot featured *Rockin' Spot* and *You Don't Know What Lonesome Is* on their 1994 compilation **For A Life Of Sin** and Tom Dooley on **The Executioner's Last Songs Vol 3**, while Boyd sang *Hang Your Head In Shame* and duetted *Stay A Little Longer* with Neko Case on Langford's **Salute The Majesty Of Bob Wills** project. However, Rice assembled live tapes dating from 1960 to 1971, plus a 1988 recording of Robbie Fulks' *Cigarette State*, for this 24 track retrospective, which showcases the group's versatility, juxtaposing Johnny Bond, Webb Pierce, Merle Haggard, Osborne Brothers, Pee Wee King, Mary Robbins, Don Gibson, Conway Twitty and Speedy West with Nat King Cole, Johnny Mercer, Teddy Randazzo, Bobby Darin and George Harrison. Highlights are Dave Kirby's *Sidewalks Of Chicago* and Liz Anderson's *Guess My Eyes Were Bigger Than My Heart*, but the entire album will make you wish you'd got to hang out at the Double RR just once.

Fifteen years have passed since The Sundowners last played, but their influence lives on. When Rob Miller says, "In a very real way, Bloodshot would not have been hatched if it weren't for them. It's kind of their fault," he places them as godfathers of an entire generation of country musicians, insurgent, alternative and real, coast to coast.

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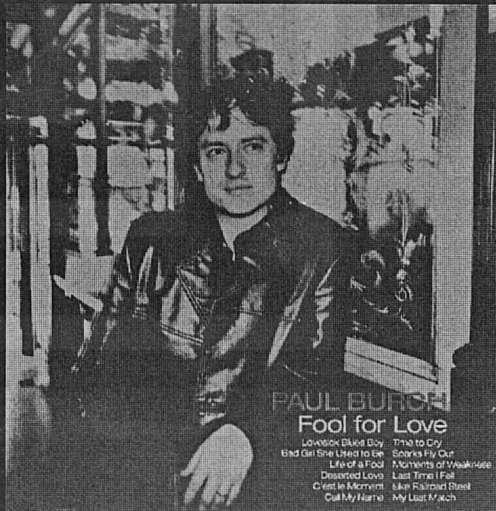
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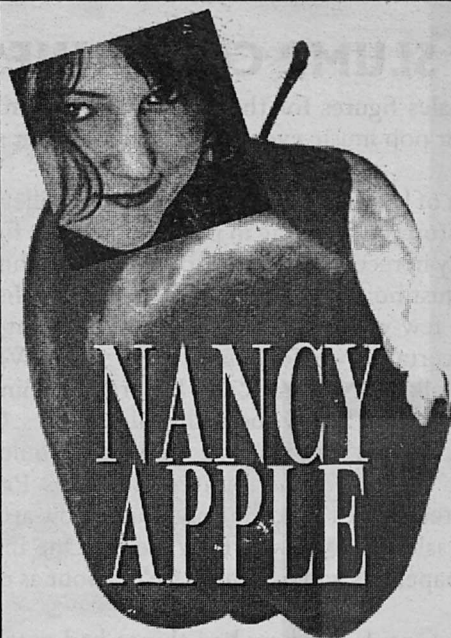
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— Bill Ellis, The Commercial Appeal

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— Rikk Matheson, Rikkreviews.com

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— Nightflying Magazine, Little Rock, AR

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JOHN THE REVEALATOR

By now, you're probably sick to death of 'Best Of 2003' lists but who am I to buck a venerable media tradition? Anyway, this is my and the FAR team's chance to give some recognition to the people who won't get much anyplace else. Also, this is as close as I come to taking a vacation, so get over it.

Before we get listing, if you don't have a wall calendar yet, or even if you do, **Cheapo Discs**, Austin, have a great one of retro cheesecake pix by George Brainard, featuring our very own Ms **Martí Brom** as Miss May. Try www.cheapotexas.com.

JC's BEST OF 2003

ALBUMS OF THE YEAR

- 1 **Anna Fermin's Trigger Gospel: Oh, The Stories We Hold** (Undertow)
- 2 **Chip Taylor & Carrie Rodriguez: The Trouble With Humans** (TMG)
- 3 **Ray Wylie Hubbard: Growl** (Philo)
- 4 **Ronny Elliott: Hep** (Blue Heart)
- 5 **Martí Brom: Wise To You** (Goofin')
- 6 **Jo Serrapere & The Willy Dunns: Tonight At Johnny's Speakeasy** (Detroit Radio)

DEBUT ALBUMS

- 1 **Halden Wofford & The Hi-Beams** (Hi-Beams)
- 2 **Eric Westbury: Burnt Tongues & Blue Truths** (Barreltown)
- 3 **Graham Lindsey: Famous Anonymous Wilderness** (Catamount)

VA/TRIBUTE ALBUM

- 1 **HUAC** [Hot Unsigned Americana Compilation] (Catamount)
- 2 **Jon Langford & The Pine Valley Cosmonauts: The Executioner's Last Songs Vols 2 & 3** (Bloodshot)
- 3 **Lonesome, Ornry & Mean: A Tribute To Waylon Jennings** (Dualtone)

REISSUE/HISTORIC ALBUM

- 1 **Bill Neely: Austin's Original Singer-Songwriter** (Lost Art)
- 2 **Thomas Fraser: Long Gone Lonesome Blues** (Nel Music)
- 3 **The Sundowners: Chicago Country Legends** (Bloodshot Revival)

FEMALE ARTIST

- 1 **Carrie Rodriguez** 2 **Anna Fermin** 3 **Martí Brom**

MALE ARTIST

- 1 **Bobby Flores** 2 **John Lilly** 3 **Howard Kalish**

SONGWRITER

- 1 **Chip Taylor** 2 **Anna Fermin** 3 **Ronny Elliott**

BEST IN THE INDUSTRY

- 1 **Gurf Morlix** 2 **Henry Horenstein** 3 **Catamount Records**

LOOSE DIAMONDS

A DJ's PRIVATE STASH; #1 PROFESSOR PURPLE

First time I met legendary British DJ Charlie Gillett, I thanked him for turning me on to what is still an all-time favorite album, the eponymous **Bobby Charles**, and he told me that I was the missing piece and he now knew personally everybody in the UK who'd bought a copy. He'd played it over and over, reviewed it everywhere he could and talked it up endlessly but at the end of the day this masterpiece had sold a few hundred copies nationwide.

A sobering thought for any writer or DJ, but most all of us have been there, going evangelical over albums that knock us sideways but which, inexplicably as far as we're concerned, simply fail to click. When Richard Schwartz, aka Professor Purple, host of *Amarillo Highway*, KZMU, Moab, UT, suggested something along the lines of 'Albums I wish I could have got more people to buy' as a FAR & Away category, I dismissed the notion out of hand because it would have meant running a staggeringly long list of obscure records (trust me on this, I know my guys).

Still, the idea resonated for obvious reasons, so, replacing the sporadic *FAR DJ Of The Month* dealie, this will be a regular spot where FAR DJs will get another chance to beat the drum for their neglected faves (* means still available). And Richard gets to kick it off. Professor Purple says, check 'em out:

Catherine Britt: Dusty Smiles And Heartbreak Cures (ABC [Australia]) *

Cow: Feeding Time (Trikont [Germany]) *

Patsy Montana & The Prairie Ramblers: The Very Early Patsy Montana (Cattle LP)

Ranch Romance: Western Dream (Ranch Hand)

The Reedy Buzzards (Self released) *

Jerry Rigged: Piano (Self released) *

Mingo Saldivar: The Dancing Cowboy Sings Country (Hacienda) *

Sidesaddle & Co: The Girl From The Red Rose Saloon (Faultline) *

Joe West & The Sinners: Jamie Was A Boozer (Frogville) *

CHARLES EARLE's B-Sides

A BLIP ON THE RADAR

**Formerly All Over the List of Nominees,
Music Row is Now Scarce on Grammy Night**

December is a boring month in the music business for Nashville. It always has been. I remember my days of working on Music Row, when it was a long, tedious exercise in receiving tour sweatshirts and food platters from artists we represented. Other than the guys working putrid Christmas albums and 'best of' compilations, most folks in the industry are twiddling their thumbs.

However, due to the fact that the 2004 Grammy telecast has been moved up a few weeks to the beginning of February, Music Row got an early Christmas gift in the form of the nominees list. Believe me, these folks have gotten better gifts in their day. All you need to know in order to get the picture is that Ricky Scaggs was the Nashville's most nominated artist. Ouch!

It hasn't been that long ago since Music Row was getting artists in the major categories on Grammy night. Faith Hill, Shania Twain and the like earned nominations for Album of the Year, Best Pop Female Vocal Performance, etc... We also used to get a Nashville act into the Best New Artist category now and then. But in recent years Nashville hasn't managed any appearances in the big categories, and has often seen country nods go to artists like Lyle Lovett, who have virtually no ties whatsoever to Nashville.

So how did Music Row fare this year? Well, not bad in terms of nominations, but we'll have to see who takes home the trophies. Lovett and fellow Texan Ray Benson are nominated against a bunch of Nashville's usual suspects in the Male Country Vocal category, and either could take home the hardware. Likewise, Dolly Parton and the late June Carter Cash could send a few of Nashville's divas home unhappy that evening. And wouldn't it be fun to see Pat Green win in an upset over a bunch of country chart hits in the Country Song category? These kinds of things have happened many times before, as people from all over the industry are voting. Nashville hasn't had much luck stuffing the ballot boxes on Grammy night.

Also, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the handful of nominations given to the late Warren Zevon for the **The Wind**, an album he released just before his death in 2003. Zevon is without question one of my songwriting heroes. I had the pleasure of seeing him live a handful of times and many of his 20 and 25 year old songs still thrill me as if they were new. Was he nominated simply as a result of his death? Absolutely. Does that bother me? Not at all. He had a gift that deserves to be heard and celebrated. So tune in February 8 and see if Zevon gets some much-deserved recognition.

THE SLUMP CONTINUES

The final Soundscan sales figures for the record industry in 2003 are out, and there is good news for pop music even as we are looking at some seriously bad news for Nashville.

Apparently the threat of lawsuits for downloading music illegally may have been just the thing needed to stop the bleeding in pop. While sales figures for the genre have dropped significantly in recent years, the 2003 numbers showed a decline over last year of less than 1%. Just holding steady is a major accomplishment these days. And while it may take a few years to see if a reduction in internet piracy is the reason for steady sales, it certainly would seem to make sense. Whatever the reason, you can bet that a lot of folks in New York and LA are breathing easier.

Music Row, however, was not happy about the sales figures. County music sales were down 10% in 2003 versus those of 2002 (and they would seem even worse were it not for the fact that *Billboard* counted the Elvis Presley **30 #1 Hits** compilation as a country record). In fact, the only Music Row artist to put an album in the overall top 10 for sales in 2003 was Toby Keith. One industry analyst was quoted in our local daily paper as saying, "I think we're about as close to the bottom as we're going to get."

Harsh words indeed, considering how bad things had gotten in recent years. However, as they always do, a number of industry types here in town are pointing to reasons for optimism in 2004. The first thing they mention is that Kenny Chesney, Clint Black and LeAnn Rimes all have new records during the first few months of this year. This hardly seems reason for any Row execs to buy vacation homes to me, but they have to find something to feel good about. It has also been noted that Faith Hill should have a new album out this year that features a return to more of a country sound. Her last album, **Cry**, tanked in comparison to her previous releases. But since outlets such as VH1 and pop radio ignored Faith this last time around, she's apparently going to come back to country fans with her tail between her legs.

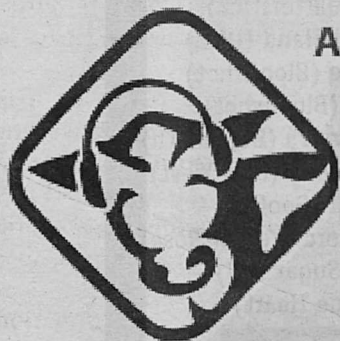
So what will the final numbers for 2004 look like? Personally, I'm not very optimistic. I don't see artists like LeAnn Rimes or Clint Black doing a whole lot for the industry. Chesney may sell some records, but I wouldn't figure on more than three million or so. And Faith Hill's numbers will once again be limited without having the massive exposure from pop outlets. If hers is the biggest record of this year, I would guess that we lose another 5% in sales for 2004, proving that we haven't hit bottom yet.

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#1 RICK SHEA & PATTY BOOKER: OUR SHANGRI-LA

(Tres Pescadores) *B&C/*CP/*DB/*EW/*MM/*PP/*TA

- 2 The Sundowners: Chicago Country Legends (Bloodshot Revival) *DC/*JZ/*SH
- 3 Paul Burch: Fool For Love (Bloodshot) *TW
- 4 Lauren Sheehan: Some Old Lonesome Day (self) *JH/*SMJ/*TF
- 5 Graham Lindsey: Famous Anonymous Wilderness (Catamount) *JCS/*SJ/*TO
- 6 Chris Stuart & Backcountry: Saints & Strangers (Backcountry) *EB/*FW
- 7 Johnny Cash: Unearthed (American/Lost Highway) *MB/*RC/*RH
- 8 Jerry Sires Band: You're Gonna Be Cold (self)
- 9 Eric Westbury: Burnt Tongues & Blue Truths (Barreltown) *FM
- 10 John Lilly: Last Chance To Dance (self) *DWT
- 11 Anna Fermin's Trigger Gospel: Oh, The Stories We Hold (Undertow) *GS/*TJ
- 12= Marti Brom: Wise To You (Goofin') *RMS
- Merle Haggard: Like Never Before (Hag) *DT/*S&D
- 13 Wanda Jackson: Heart Trouble (CMH) *DP
- 14 Bottle Rockets: Blue Sky (Sanctuary)
- 15 VA: Livin' Lovin' Losin'; Songs Of The Louvin Brothers (Universal) *LG
- 16= David Childers & The Modern Don Juans: Room #23 (Silver Meteor) *RE
- Billy Joe Shaver: Try And Try Again (Compadre) *MA/*T&L
- 17 Robert Earl Keen: Farm Fresh Onions (Koch) *LW/*TT
- 18 Hot Club Of Cowtown: Continental Stomp (Hightone)
- 19 Mercy Brothers: Strange Adventure (Gibraltar) *DA
- 20= Deke Dickerson: Mr Entertainment (Rock & Roll Inc) *RS
- Chris Knight: The Jealous Kind (Dualtone) *FS
- 21= Steve Earle: Just An American Boy (Artemis) *DY
- Darrell Scott: Theatre Of The Unheard (Full Light) *JB
- Kelly Willis & Bruce Robison: Happy Holidays (Boars Nest) *TH
- 22= Tom Adler: Jenny Where You Going (Coal Holler) *MF
- Rosie Flores: Single Rose (Durango Rose) *AR
- Jack Ingram: Live At Billy Bob's Texas (Smith Group) *WR
- Albert Lee: Heartbreak Hill (Sugar Hill) *KD
- 23 Ruthie & The Wranglers: Someday (Lasso) *MDT
- 24= Blind Boys of Alabama: Go Tell It On The Mountain (Realworld) *TG
- Richard Fontaine: Post To Wire (El Cortez) *OS
- The Mavericks (Sanctuary) *TS
- 25= An American Starlet: The Duchess Of Hazard (Starlet's Web) *MD
- Blackstone Valley Sinners: The Cold Hard Truth About Christmas (Valley) *3RC
- Cave Catt Sammy: Whiskey And The Devil (Rubric) *BC
- Roger Creager: Long Way To Mexico (Dualtone) *RR
- Richard Dobson: A River Will Do (Brambus) *DJ
- Charlotte Greig: Winter Woods (Harmonium) *KG
- Caroline Herring: Wellspring (Blue Corn) *NA
- The Hunger Mountain Boys : Fashioned In The Old Way (self) *BR
- Duane Jarvis: Delicious (Slewfoot) *CD
- Lafayette Rhythm Devils: Pray For Us (Z'Affaire) *JF
- Delbert McClinton: Live (New West) *CM
- Davis Raines: Parts Unknown (Shell Point) *CL
- Dan Reeder (Oh Boy) *SC
- Chris Scruggs: Honky Tonkin' Lifestyle (DIY) *MT
- Michael Smith & Jamie O'Reilly: The Gift Of The Magi (Bird Avenue) *MR
- Ove Støylen: Dusty Boots (KS) *RW
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FAR & AWAY THE BEST OF 2003

ALBUMS OF THE YEAR

#1 CHIP TAYLOR & CARRIE RODRIGUEZ: THE TROUBLE WITH HUMANS

(Trainwreck/Lone Star)

- 2 Rick Shea & Patty Booker: Our Shangri-LA (Tres Pescadores)
- 3 Ray Wylie Hubbard: Growl (Philo)
- 4 Dwight Yoakam: Population Me (Audium)
- 5 John Lilly: Last Chance To Dance (self)
- 6 Calxico: Feast of Wire (Quarterstick)
- 7 Rodney Crowell: Fate's Right Hand (DMZ)
- 8 Wayne Hancock: Swing Time (Bloodshot)
- 9 Paul Burch: Fool For Love (Bloodshot)
- 10 Cornell Hurd Band: Live At Jovita's (Behemoth)
- 11 Drive By Truckers: Decoration Day (New West)
- 12 Marti Brom: Wise To You (Goofin')
- 13 Bobby Flores: Just For The Record (Yellow Rose)
- 14 Greg Trooper: Floating (Sugar Hill)
- 15 Ronny Elliott: Hep (Blue Heart)

DEBUT ALBUM

#1 HALDEN WOFFORD & THE HI-BEAMS (Hi-Beams)

- 2 Graham Lindsey: Famous Anonymous Wilderness (Catamount)
- 3 Bobby Flores: Just For The Record (Yellow Rose)
- 4 Eric Westbury: Burnt Tongues & Blue Truths (Barreltown)
- 5 Elizabeth McQueen & The Firebrands: The Fresh Up Club (Gravitrone)
- 6 Adrienne Young: Plow To The End Of The Row (Addie Belle)

VARIOUS ARTISTS/TRIBUTE ALBUM

#1 JON LANGFORD & THE PINE VALLEY COSMONAUTS:

THE EXECUTIONERS' LAST SONGS VOLS 2 & 3 (Bloodshot)

- 2 Lonesome On'ry And Mean; A Tribute To Waylon Jennings (Dualtone)
- 3 Livin' Lovin' Losin': Songs Of The Louvin Brothers (Universal South)
- 4 HUAC [Hot Unsigned Americana Collection] (Catamount)
- 5 Shout, Sister, Shout; A Tribute To Sister Rosetta Tharpe (MC)
- 6 Just Because I Am A Woman; Songs Of Dolly Parton (Sugar Hill)

REISSUE/HISTORIC ALBUM

#1 THE SUNDOWNERS: CHICAGO COUNTRY LEGENDS (Bloodshot)

- 2 Willie Nelson: Crazy; The Demo Sessions (Sugar Hill)
- 3 Freda & The Firedogs (Plug)
- 4 Waylon Jennings: Waylon Live; The Expanded Edition (BMG)
- 5 Bill Neeley: Austin's Original Singer-Songwriter (Lost Art)
- 6 Thomas Fraser: Long Gone Lonesome Blues (Nel)

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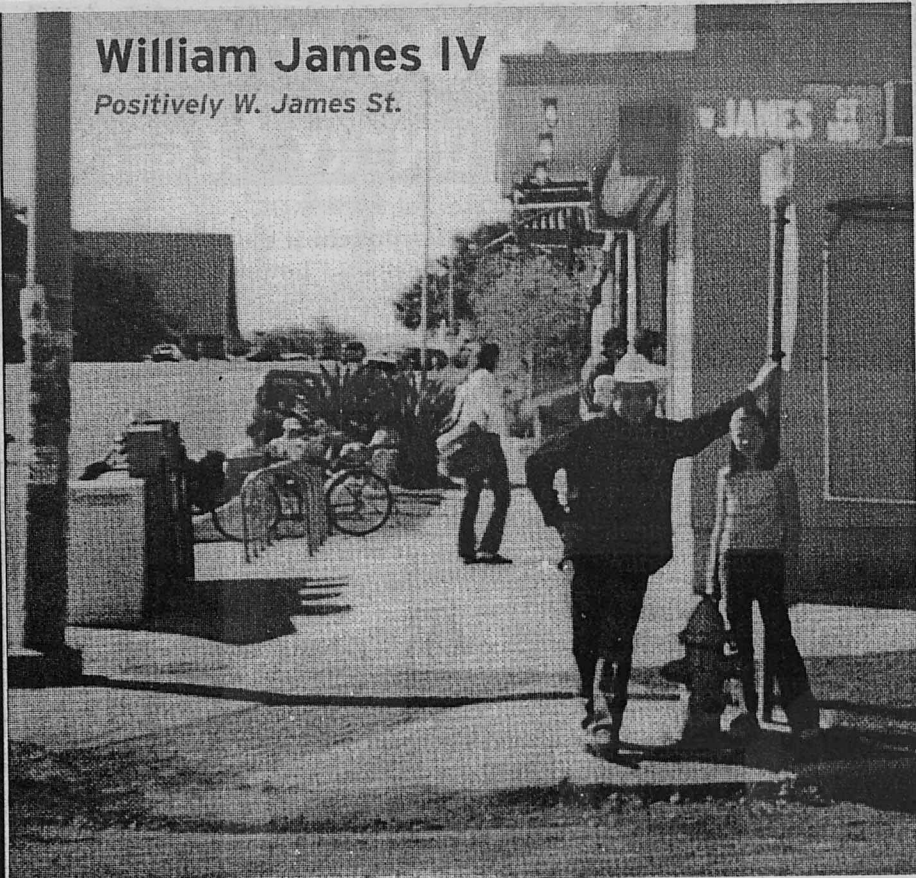
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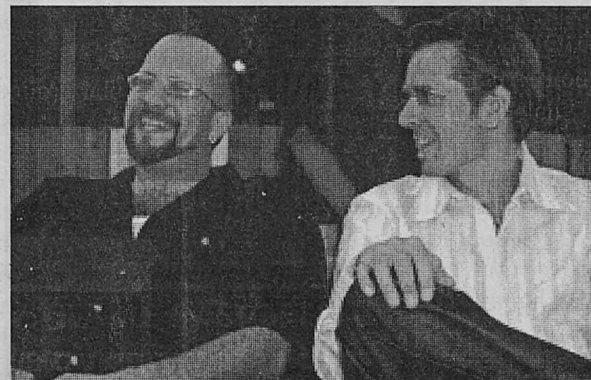
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R.I.P. GARY STEWART

Some of you may be too young to remember this, and may find it hard to believe, but there was a time, not all that long ago, when major labels put out some really great honky tonk music. You can almost put a date on when that ended—Lee Clayton was at Capitol from 1973 to 1981, Gene Watson and Jessi Colter both from 1975 to 1981, Joe Ely's first stint at MCA, with the real Joe Ely Band, was from 1977 to 1981 and Gary Stewart, lasting only a year longer despite being far more successful, was with RCA from 1975 to 1982.

Born May 28th, 1945, in Letcher County, KY, Stewart was raised in Fort Pierce, FL, which remained his home base until Tuesday, December 16th, when he shot himself, shortly after his wife of 43 years died. Working in an airplane factory and singing in local bars, he started writing and pitching songs in the late 60s, catching the attention of Mel Tillis and Jerry Bradley. He moved to Nashville and though his recordings on small labels went nowhere and he was playing piano in Charlie's Pride's Plainsmen, his songs were cut by Stonewall Jackson, Billy Walker, Cal Smith, Nat Stuckey, Jim Ed Brown and others, and he could well have flourished simply as a songwriter—at one point in 1971, four songs in the country Top 10 were his work. However, on becoming RCA's Nashville VP, Bradley signed Stewart and in 1973 released his single, *Drinkin' Thing*, which initially flopped but, when reissued in 1974, hit the Top Ten.

In 1975 Stewart and RCA unleashed one of the greatest country albums ever made, **Out Of Hand**, which yielded the #1 hit single *She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)*. Stewart made six more albums for RCA, none of which rose to the same heights, artistically or in the record stores, though **Your Place Or Mine** came close. However, one of his early singles was *Ramblin' Man*, the Allman Brothers, not Hank Williams, and he graphically illustrated his dual allegiances with **Cactus And A Rose**, which, featuring members of the Allman Brothers and Bonnie Bramlett, unfortunately provided proof positive that there wasn't much call for a honky tonk/Southern rock fusion.

Perhaps trying to turn Stewart's reputation for drug abuse and hard drinking excess to some advantage, RCA then teamed him up with another notorious lush, Dean Dillon, for two dreadful good ol' boozing country boys albums which, as one writer put it, "made the redneck rowdiness of Hank Williams Jr sound philosophical by comparison," after which they cut him loose. Returning to Fort Pierce, Stewart reemerged in 1988, clean and sober but with enough of the same high energy, on Hightone, with whom he made three albums. Indeed, his last album, **Live At Billy Bob's Texas** (Smith Music Group *****), recorded in 2003 and released not long before his death, demonstrates that, almost 30 years after his glory days, he could still outsing not just his contemporaries but pretty much any honky tonk singer you care to name.

Today the epithet "too country for rock, too rock for country" is all too often worn as smug, self-congratulatory badge of pride, but Gary Stewart, its poster boy, was one of the first to discover, the hard way, that it was a recipe for commercial disaster. With his huge, vibrato-laden tenor, which sounds like a cross between Hank Williams lonesome and Jerry Lee Lewis fire and brimstone, he made one of the truly classic country albums, and even his lesser work was better than anything that's come out of Nashville since 1981.

JC

THE SUNDOWNERS CHICAGO COUNTRY LEGENDS

(Bloodshot Revival *****.5)

King Alfonso X once said "Had I been present at the creation of the world I would have proposed some improvements," however, as honky tonks and country music weren't real big in 13th century Spain, I doubt El Sabio would have tabled my suggestion—not just a good saloon in every single town but a good country band in every one of them. From the reactions of visiting friends and touring musicians, it's clear that bars like Casbeers are as rare as bands like The Starline Rhythm Boys, so if you've ever been lucky enough to hit the combo, for instance getting to see Don Walser & The Pure Texas Band any Monday night at Henry's, well, all I can say is that the Good Lord must have taken a liking to you. As he did to people who got to Barney's Ringside Ranch, aka Bar Double RR, in downtown Chicago, where The Sundowners played most every night for almost 30 years.

Reminiscent Chicagoans provide some interesting parallels between the two joints. Bloodshot Records' Rob Miller echoed the famous graffito, 'I dreamed I went to Heaven. It wasn't as good as Henry's.' "The first time I visited Chicago, a friend said 'You've got to see this place.' We walked down the stairs and it was like walking into a home you didn't even know you'd been missing. The Sundowners played all night, the beer was cold and it seemed like heaven." Another Bloodshot founder, Eric Babcock, recalls an analogue to Henry's wildly diverse but amicable crowd. "White collar Loop-cubicle escapees, curiosity seeking college kids, slumming suburbanites, indie rock dilettantes and, of course, all species of displaced country mice looking to reconnect. The magic trick was The Sundowners' capacity to make all these disparate factions feel equally at home."

And like Don Walser & The Pure Texas Band, lead guitarist Don Walls, acoustic rhythm guitarist Bob Boyd, and bassplayer Curt Delaney didn't just play standards, they set and shared them. As John T Rice, who produced this album and put a band together for Don when he first visited Chicago, says, "Walser and The Sundowners had the same goal, to help create the next generation of the Country Tradition."

"If you wanted to play music, they wanted to play it with you. If you were a musician, it was almost mandatory that you joined them onstage. The band provided an excellent training ground for young country musicians, every new apprentice walked away with a clearer concept of 'taste' and 'repertoire.' The most important thing musicians learned on their stage was to be flexible and willing to learn new material on the spot. Regular jam sessions allowed younger players to meet and form bands of their own."

A notable beneficiary of Sundowners largesse was Jon Langford. "On The Mekons' first tour of the States, we stumble into the Double RR and Bob Boyd invites us up to play a few numbers!!! Don Walls stays and plays with us, his beautiful fluid guitar lines acting like a powerful glue to hold us together and pass our racket off as something the regulars can tolerate. He smiles encouragingly and doesn't seem alarmed by how crap we are. Maybe he recognizes some kindred spirit, maybe we're all just smashed. When I moved to Chicago, they'd always asked me up to play, which was flattering, scary and ultimately educational. Getting onstage and singing with The Sundowners in front of a crowd of mean and inebriated genuine Americans meant tangible vindication, a rite of passage."

Originally Curley Coldiron's Circle C Boys, Walls, from Logan, W Virginia, Boyd, from Chattanooga, TN, and Delaney, from Albany, GA, became The Sundowners (from the Robert Mitchum movie, right there what's not to like?) when Coldiron retired in 1959, taking over his residency and playing at the same club, though it moved from N Clark to W Madison to W Randolph, four or five nights a week until 1989 when, just like Henry's, the Double RR lost its lease and the building was razed. Walls suffered a debilitating stroke in the early 90s, Delaney died in 1997 and Boyd in 2000.

Until now there was little, apart from rare Circle C 45s and an LP (of songs by Chicago songwriters), to show for the trio's long reign as kings of Chicago country. Bloodshot featured *Rockin' Spot* and *You Don't Know What Lonesome Is* on their 1994 compilation **For A Life Of Sin** and Tom Dooley on **The Executioner's Last Songs Vol 3**, while Boyd sang *Hang Your Head In Shame* and dueted *Stay A Little Longer* with Neko Case on Langford's **Salute The Majesty Of Bob Wills** project. However, Rice assembled live tapes dating from 1960 to 1971, plus a 1988 recording of Robbie Fulks' *Cigarette State*, for this 24 track retrospective, which showcases the group's versatility, juxtaposing Johnny Bond, Webb Pierce, Merle Haggard, Osborne Brothers, Pee Wee King, Mary Robbins, Don Gibson, Conway Twitty and Speedy West with Nat King Cole, Johnny Mercer, Teddy Randazzo, Bobby Darin and George Harrison. Highlights are Dave Kirby's *Sidewalks Of Chicago* and Liz Anderson's *Guess My Eyes Were Bigger Than My Heart*, but the entire album will make you wish you'd got to hang out at the Double RR just once.

Fifteen years have passed since The Sundowners last played, but their influence lives on. When Rob Miller says, "In a very real way, Bloodshot would not have been hatched if it weren't for them. It's kind of their fault," he places them as godfathers of an entire generation of country musicians, insurgent, alternative and real, coast to coast.

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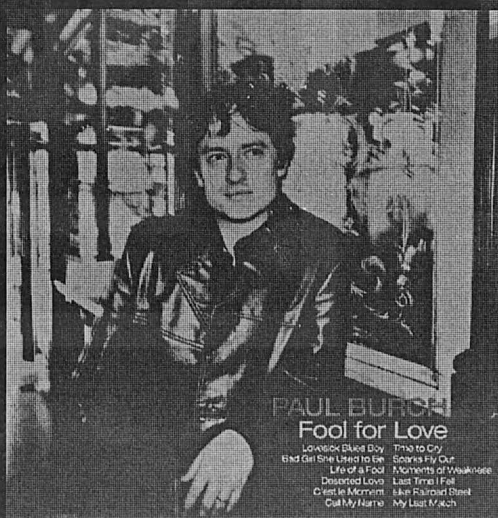
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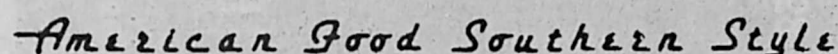


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