

Son of Katching Up – #28

More Album Reviews

During March and April 2001, as a taster for the forthcoming 30th Anniversary Kerrville Folk Festival, Rod Kennedy has been hosting a daily series of two-hour long *internet* radio shows, featuring recordings by musicians who have appeared on past Festival bills. The shows have also been archived on the Kerrville web site and can be accessed at <http://www.kerrville-music.com/mfk.signup.htm> Once the Festival gets into full swing on Thursday 24th May, no doubt the weekend main-stage shows will be broadcast "live" over the internet [as happened last year]. Check the Kerrville web site nearer the date for details. Alternatively, sign up for their newsletter and you'll definitely be informed of those "live" dates. For those in the UK, the "live" listening times are 12.00 midnight till 6.00 am. Oh well, if the music is good, does time matter.....live vicariously, sleep all day and listen all through the night.

Iain Matthews "A Tiniest Wham" Perfect Pitch
No Grey Faith "Secrets All Told – The Songs Of Sandy Denny" Perfect Pitch
Iain Matthews/Ad Vanderveen "The Iain Adventure" Perfect Pitch
Iain Matthews/Elliott Murphy "La Terre Commune" Blue Rose [Import]

Iain Matthews has been a busy bee during the past year, with a total of four recordings being added to his already extensive catalogue. The 2CD edition of "A Tiniest Wham" was a limited edition that reverted to a single studio CD with the second pressing. Of course, you've already figured out that the recording title is an anagram of Iain's name. It's a habit of his. Although the first pressing is reported to be sold out, my bet is that there's still an odd copy lying around, if you're prepared to search long and far. Kicking off with his own "I'm Alive" there's numerous references to personal turmoil in the lyrics of songs such as "Swinging From The Yardarm," "Like Mercury" [co-written with Michael Fracasso] and "Our Secret Storm" – which makes you wonder at the relevance of the liner artwork. Located in a scrap merchant's yard, an old car prominently features "ROMEO" and "JULIET" on windscreen sunshield. Why a scrap yard? The second disc is a recording of a 1998 German show where Iain was supported by The Swinelakers – aka Larry Thompson [drums], Mark Andes [bass] and Bradley Kopp [guitar]. The other three discs are by way of side projects for Matthews, the first being a backward glance at the canon of former Fairport Convention band mate, Alexandra Elene MacLean Denny. Supporting Iain in this experiment are Lindsay Gilmour, Jim Fogarty [also featured on "Tiniest"] and Walt Rich. "The Iain Adventure" was/is a limited edition release, and may be long gone [as well]. Apart from Van Morrison's "And It Stoned Me" the remaining thirteen songs on the menu include nine from Matthews [two co-written with Michael Fracasso] and four by Ad Vanderveen. It was recorded by the duo in Holland last May at one of their gigs. The idea for the second duo project, with Elliott Murphy, is basically the brainchild of Edgar Heckmann, owner of the Blue Rose label. It was recorded in Le Harve, in the spring of 2000. Apart from contributing their own originals – Murphy's "Navy Blue" is an absolute corker – the duo perform covers

from Dylan, Springsteen and Jesse Colin Young. And finally, there's now a recording of the Matthews classic "Fading Fast," which I first heard at a local show some two years ago. The Perfect Pitch releases are available from **Unique Gravity, PO Box 114, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S40 3YU**, while the Blue Rose disc is available from **Rauheckstr. 10, D-74232 Abstatt, Germany** and on the web at www.bluerose-records.com

Mark Heard "Mystery Mind" Fingerprint Records [Import]

Four interview segments find Mark furnishing insights into his life, musical influences and personal philosophy. They link four demo tracks, including the previously unreleased, opening, album title cut. One of the remaining performances dates from 1982 – 24 minutes long, featuring six songs performed "live"; plus two songs from the 1992 Cornerstone Festival, Mark's final performance – including the anthemic "Orphans Of God." Pigeonholed as a contemporary Christian performer – a mantle that never sat well with Heard – you may recall that Mark's spiritual inspiration was, in his time, considered a rebel. Proceeds from the sale of this recording go to help support Mark's wife and daughter. Available from **Fingerprint Records, PO Box 197, Merrimac, MA 01860, U.S.A.** or on the web at www.MarkHeard.com

Kate Campbell "Wandering Strange" Eminent Records [Import]

For her fifth solo release, Campbell has taken a massive gamble by dealing an overtly religious hand. While the inspiration for "Rosaryville" was obvious, "Wandering Strange," a collection of gospel songs recorded in Muscle Shoals – and you can tell – is less accessible. "Come Thou Fount," the oldest hymn here, dates from the mid-eighteenth century, while Gordon Lightfoot's "The House You Live In," the opening cut, is the most contemporary tune apart from the four songs Kate co-wrote. Those sharing the writing credits include Spooner Oldham. Available from **Fish Records** in the UK.

Eliza Gilkyson "Hard Times In Babylon" Red House Records [Import]

Apart from her two late eighties recordings for Gold Castle, and Private's 1993 set "Through The Looking Glass," the distribution of Eliza's four other solo efforts, spanning 1980 to 1999, has been somewhat patchy. "Babylon" is the first disc to receive full distribution in the UK, via Koch, hence the rise in her profile in the national press of late. Opening with "Beauty Way," an autobiographical road song that possesses an air of resignation about having to remain on the *musical treadmill* in order to earn a living, it is pretty much the exception here. The remaining songs generally explore facets of the turmoil that ensues following the collapse of a relationship. For Eliza, happy days have rarely been the source of inspiration. And there is much inspiration here. Available in your local record store now, and from **Fish Records**.

Various "This Is Boston...Not Austin Vol. 2" Black Wolf/Eastern Front Records [Import]

This 2CD collection has actually been available for a couple of years. The second disc features the work of twelve Boston poets, including contributions from Ellis Paul and

Peter Mulvey. The sixteen cut music CD includes tracks by Ellis Paul, the wonderful Jennifer Kimball, Peter Mulvey, Jess Klein and Vance Gilbert. Available from **Eastern Front Records, 7 Curve Street, Medfield, Massachusetts 02052, U.S.A.**

Various **"Badlands – A Tribute To Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska"** Sub Pop [Import]

Having survived an avalanche of, consistently less than worthwhile, compilation recordings that focused on the catalogue of some long gone chart band, or an aggregation that had once been the delight of some *well informed critic*, the latest ploy is to record the entire contents of a classic album. The greater the fame of [original] artist, the greater the chance of reaping a [considerable] financial harvest. Twenty years after the birth of Springsteen's stark and chilling masterwork, comes this creditable tribute, including covers of three songs from the original sessions not on the original disc. The featured performers include Dar Williams, Ani DiFranco and Los Lobos.

Various **"'Til We Outnumber Them"** Righteous Babe [Import]

Four years of persistence pays off. Ani DiFranco's label has finally released this "live" Woody Guthrie tribute recording made at a couple of shows in Cleveland, Ohio during September 1996 and featuring Woody tunes rendered by Arlo, Pete Seeger, Billy Bragg, Bruce Springsteen and others. Available from **Village Records**.

Various **"Folk Scene Collection Volume 2"** Red House [Import]

Following a debacle at California's KPFK-FM last autumn, the Larman's are thankfully now back on-air Stateside, c/o WUMB in Boston, Mass. This disc includes contributions from Nanci Griffith, Tom Russell, Lucinda Williams, Eliza Gilkyson and Patty Larkin. Available in the UK via Koch Distribution..

Laura Nyro **"Live From Mountain Stage"** Blue Plate [Import]

I suppose you have to ask the question - if Nyro were still alive would these recordings have seen the light of day ? Cut during a November 1990 appearance on the nationally syndicated, West Virginia based radio show, Laura kicks off with the Phil Spector/Hank Hunter tune "Oh Yeah Maybe Baby" – which opened her 1993 album **"Walk The Dog & Light The Light."** Two other selections for that set and half a dozen cuts from the 1989 **"Live At The Bottom Line"** recording appear here. The covers segue of "Let It Be Me" and "The Christmas Song" are the only items previously unrecorded by Nyro.

John Gorka **"The Company You Keep"** Red House [Import]

Stoically serious, as ever, Gorka credits the production of his latest collection to two Polish guys and a Ukranian. John is one of the former. This time around, applying his own unique twist, Gorka's words reflect upon subjects such as married life ["Over There"], growing old - without much grace, that is ["People My Age"] and the break up of a marriage ["When You Walk In"]. Available in the UK via Koch Distribution..

Brooks Williams **"Skiffle Bop"** Signature Sounds [Import]

Following in wake of last year's, instrumental only, collection **"Little Lion,"** comes **"Skiffle-Bop"** a vocal and instrumental cocktail - a mix of country-blues, swing and [bebop] jazz - from one of the most fluid acoustic/electric guitarists on the planet. Seven Williams' originals are featured along with four covers from writers such as Pat Buchanan [The Blue Nile], Pat Metheny and T Bone Burnett. Available from **Fish Records** in the UK. In the USA, try www.signaturesounds.com

Ron Sexsmith And The Uncool **"Grand Opera Lane"** no label [Import]

Produced by Blue Rodeo alumni, Bob Wiseman, the recording sessions for **"Grand Opera Lane"** began in 1987 and stretched over the ensuing four years. Sexsmith's self-titled solo debut appeared in 1995. The eleven originals here, one co-written with Wiseman, rock a little harder than the laid back Sexsmith that we subsequently learned to love. The already familiar "Speaking With The Angel," plus "Trains" and "Tell You" are the only tracks to hint at Sexsmith's future melodic magic. For completists only. Available from www.maplemusic.com

David Olney **"Omar's Blues"** Dead Reckoning [Import]

This fourteen track song cycle is divided into three segments, "Omar In Love" "Reverend Omar" and "Omar In Hollywood." "Omar's Blues # 1" which kicks off the opening segment is reminiscent of Buddy Holly's "Words of Love." "Blues # 2" and "Blues # 3" introduce the subsequent parts. Suffice to say, this disc ranks as one of Olney's best ever albums.

Kristina Olsen & Peter Grayling **"Duet"** Take A Break [Import]

Having resorted to self-releasing her recordings, I finally caught up with Olsen's latest work when she played locally last autumn. Supported by Grayling's cello, **"Duet"** features a reinterpretation of one of Kristina's best, "My Father's Piano" and a couple of new keepers including "Already Gone." Available from **Take A Break Productions, P.O. Box 21, Venice, California 90294-0021, U.S.A.**

Kristina Olsen [with Peter Grayling] **"The Truth of A Woman"** Take a Break [Import]

Track 4, "The Yellow Piper," tells of a woman who eventually fulfils her dream of becoming a licensed pilot. It's also one of the best songs you'll ever hear. A heartfelt five and a half minute movie. For that reason and ten others, including a *live* version of Dave Dodson's amusing and sexually charged "Big O," this album is an essential purchase. Source in review above.

The Original Harmony Ridge Creekdippers **"My Own Jo Ellen"** Glitterhouse [Import]

Four albums in as many years from the Creekdippers is all fine and dandy, except their music was uniquely quirky and full of charm first time around. It is now repetitious and passe. Available from **Glitterhouse Records, Gruner Weg 25, 37688 Beverungen, Germany.**

Niamh Parsons **"In My Prime"** Green Linnet [Import]

There's a traditional feel to this whole collection, with nine songs drawn from that source. Even the contemporary material by an Irishman, Scotsman and Englishman – respectively Sean McCarthy, Andy M. Stewart and Alan Bell, is traditionally moulded. All sung by one of Ireland's finest voices. Available in your local stores now, or try www.greenlinnet.com

Ellis Paul **"Am I Home" & "Urban Folksongs"** Black Wolf [Import]

These two reissues were in a former lifetime, respectively, 1989 and 1990 cassette only releases. They've now been upgraded to CD. With his career currently at an, to date, all time high, these are snapshots from Paul's musical apprenticeship. Available from www.ellispaull.com

Bruce Robison/Charlie Robison/Jack Ingram **"Unleashed Live"** Lucky Dog [Import]

With four cuts from each of the contributors, the Robison boys possess some competence at writing songs, while Ingram is a total yahoo – "Barbie Doll," is a crowd pleasing turkey – or did I miss the point. It was co-written with Todd Snider. You don't want to know where you can purchase this one. Recorded at the legendary Gruene Hall.

Shake Russell **"Dreaming The Mystery"** No Mountain [Import]

After all these years, you know what to expect from a Shake Russell album. One of the great [secret] treasures of Texas music, Shake's songs are always tuneful, while the lyrics are never going to give you the chills, or have you gasping for breath. The fourteen selections are all collaborations, featuring scribes such as Charles John Quarto, Chuck & Brian Hamrick, Clint Black, Mike Hearne and Jimmy Stadler. Available from www.shakerussell.com

Jules Shear **"Allow Me"** Rounder/Zoe [Import]

Co-produced by Shear and Stewart Lerman [Suzzy Roche, Greg Trooper, Dar Williams], the support players include Stuart Smith, Susan Cowsill, Vicki Peterson and Suzzy Roche. If you're follow my drift, the result is great electric guitar work and soaring harmonies. Available from **Fish Records**.

Louise Taylor **"Written In Red"** Signature Sounds [Import]

The formula here seems to be co-write one and then cover one. The latter applies in the case of Ray Bonneville [1999 New Folk winner] and Wendy Beckerman. Apart from the foregoing quartet of tracks, Taylor composed the other seven songs featured here and shared this folk/blues production with Peter Galway. Available from **Fish Records**. In the USA, try www.signaturesounds.com

Burns Sisters **"Out Of The Blue"** Rounder/Philo [Import]

From the get-go, and "God Made Women," the trio of Annie, Jeannie and Marie are at their sassy best. Elsewhere, they soar vocally on the Mary Chapin tinged, Seskin/Shamblin composed cover "Something Real," and there's an Irish intro to Annie's "Longtime." Jeannie duets with Jimmie [LaFave] on his "Never Be Mine," while their treatment of the closing "Prayer Of St. Francis" is both gentle and heartfelt. Available from www.rounder.com

Various **"E Town Live Two"** E-Town Recordings [Import]

All the way from Colorado's eco-friendly, weekly radio variety show, this one features *live* cuts from Shawn Colvin, Sarah McLachlan, Townes Van Zandt and Iris DeMent.

Various **"Blaze Foley – BFI Three"** [Import]

With only one posthumously released recording to his name – Blaze was gunned down in 1989 - it's somewhat amazing that a trio of tribute albums have appeared in the last two years. The featured acts this time include Gurf Morlix, Ponty Bone and Jon Emery. Closing out the album is Blaze's only commercial success – the Merle Haggard/Willie Nelson rendition of the magical "If I Could Only Fly."

Dar Williams **"The Green World"** Razor & Tie [Import]

Four years on from her third solo effort **"End Of The Summer,"** and following the subsequent – and delightful - side trip, Cry, Cry, Cry, **"The Green World"** finds Williams' explorations of the pop genre that commenced with **"EOTS"** continuing apace. Practically gone are the humorous situation pieces and story songs. Nowadays, Dar is into anthems – prog folk/rock, for the sake of a name – and universal lyrical themes. Stuart Smith strums guitar throughout – there's a consolation. Available in the UK from **Fish Records**. Stateside, try www.razorandtie.com

Diane Zeigler **"These Are The Roots"** no label [Import]

Zeigler's sophomore effort took five years to conceive. In the years between she *retired*, became a *mom* - to two kids, revived her career and won a stack of songwriter competitions – including Kerrville '99 – and wrote the fourteen songs that appear here. The reflective "This Too Shall Pass" is the cream of the crop here. Available from **Fish Records**. In the USA try **P.O. Box 214, Montpelier, Vermont 05601**.

Luka Bloom **"Keeper Of The Flame"** Evangeline

This is Luka's covers album. While the folk scribes include Dylan, Mitchell and Hardin, Bloom indulges in a number of deceptive body swerves by including "Dancing Queen" – the Abba hit, plus Robert Smith's [The Cure] "In Between Days." Available in UK record stores now.

Marie Burns **"Free Little Bird"** Sure Thing Records [Import]

Having performed in numerous bands over the years, with and without her siblings, Marie's roots are truly showing on her solo debut. As a result, it's a rich blend of all the musical paths she's travelled – folk/pop/bluegrass/country n'more. Along the way, there's covers, co-writes and self penned originals none of which are intellectually taxing. Try www.marieburns.com

Robert Lee Castleman **"Crazy As Me"** Rounder [Import]

Fairy tale endings do occur, here on terra firma. Castleman, a sometime Nashville based trucker and songwriter, might never have cut this album if it had not been for the intervention of Alison Krauss. Long time buddy, Pat Bergeson – recently married to Krauss, invited Robert Lee to his wife's birthday party. Persuaded to pick up a guitar, Alison was much enamoured by what she heard R.L. sing and soon had Rounder owner, Ken Irwin, on the case. This ten cut collection, produced by R.L. and Bergeson, nods to

the country genre, but the material also possesses a sophistication that is stylistically reminiscent of *standards* penned by Carmichael and Mercer. Available from www.rounder.com

Bob Cheevers **"Gettysburg To Graceland"** Back Nine Records [Import]

Recently a visitor to these shores, Cheevers was a Kerrville New Folk winner in 1994, and this album actually appeared in 1997. Charlie White, who produced this set, co-wrote the opening "Forty Acres And A Mule" and "Shoulda Picked Our Own Cotton," while Cheevers wrote the remaining nine selections. Lyrically the songs concentrate on life in the Southern states, particularly from a historical perspective. For availability contact cheeversongs@earthlink.com

Terry Lee Hale **"The Blue Room"** Glitterhouse [Import]

If haunting melodies are what you seek, I'd suggest you search elsewhere. Truth to tell this recording which runs out at less than forty minutes, consists of a single dirge driven by Hale's acoustic guitar and occasional harmonica, accompanied by eight sets of *lovelorn* lyrics. As for the sexual content of those lyrics, this is a recording that you would have to play selectively in the company of your prudish, maiden aunt. Born in San Marcos, Texas, while music has been a constant factor throughout his life, Hale spent the first three decades of his life on the move from state to state. Arriving in Seattle in the mid-eighties, *Queen City* became his base for the ensuing decade. During this period, encouraged my local musicians including The Walkabouts leader, Chris Eckman, who produced this stripped bare, acoustic set, Hale launched his recording career. His third self produced cassette, **Oh What A World**, became his first European CD release, on the Normal label, seven years ago. **The Blue Room** is Hale's sixth album release, in almost as many years, for the Glitterhouse imprint. Opening with the album title cut, there are a few bars of curiously hesitant guitar work, at the beginning and close of this track. Lyrically the song recalls with *bitterness* the opening month of the year. When *Texas Rose* finds love in the arms of another, her husband kills her. Another murder is on the widower's mind as he instructs his young son to "*look after your sister*," then sets out on the trail of *the tinker* who stole his wife's heart. Passion departs, again, in chilly *Michigan Weather*, while desperation and loss is the theme that powerfully underscores the closing *Postscript*. Blue is a well-chosen colour, since these song lyrics possess a depressing similarity. We can only hope that it is a room with no exits. Available from **Glitterhouse Records, Gruner Weg 25, 37688 Beverungen, Germany** or on the internet at www.glitterhouse.com

Emmylou Harris **"Red Dirt Girl"** Grapevine

Apart from the inclusion of Patty Griffin's "One Bug Love," this album marks only the second occasion in a career now in its fourth decade where Harris has composed the majority of the material on the recording [*]. Guy Clark, Rodney Crowell, and Jill Cuniff/Daryl Johnson helped out on one song each. Malcolm Burn, the engineer on the Daniel Lanois conceived, 1995 masterpiece **"Wrecking Ball"** takes over the producer's chair on this occasion. Buddy Miller's trademark distorted guitar adds atmosphere to the proceedings, while there are guest appearances from Patty Scialfa, Brooce and Julie Miller. While it's hard to

assess if it's her finest work, **"Red Dirt Girl"** is undoubtedly a contender. Available in your local store now. [*] FYI **"The Ballad Of Sally Rose"** was the previous recording.

Bill & Bonnie Hearne **"Watching Life Through A Windshield"** Back Porch [Import]

It's darned fine to see Bill and Bonnie finally receive the recognition they so richly deserve. Two of the finest interpreters of songs that bridge the folk/country divide, they open with Dylan's "You Ain't Going Nowhere." Three decades after he performed it on the eponymous **"Sweetheart Of The Rodeo,"** Chris Hillman provides the mandolin fills here. Texas and South Western writers are represented by songs from Guy Clark, Shake Russell, Robert Keen, Butch Hancock Jon Ims and Chuck Pyle. Mighty fine, easy listening.

Sara Hickman **"Newborn"** & **"Spiritual Appliances"** Sleeveless & Shanachie [both Imports]

"Newborn" is in truth a children's album – its main aim being to encourage parents to sing to [and continue singing to] their newly born children. It features numerous original songs by Sara as well as material by, for instance, Ella Fitzgerald ["A-Tisket A-Tasket"], Cat Stevens ["Moonshadow"] and the closing Brahms' "Lullaby." **"Spiritual Appliances,"** on the other hand, is a conventional Sara Hickman recording. Of course that supposition depends on whether you consider anything that Sara does is conventional. Try www.sarahickman.com

Jess Klein **"Draw Them Near"** Rykodisc [Import]

This new, *little girl voice* recalls that of a fifteen-year old who once sang about "Society's Child" [*]. My initial impression overall was one of disappointment, and I remain of the opinion that the lyrics are fairly lightweight. As for melody – cuts such as "Ireland" and "Springtime," far outweigh folk/rock thrash fests like "Goodbye Goodbye." We're on the fence with this one, and we're stayin' there. [*] FYI it was Janis Ian.

Patty Larkin **"Regrooving The Dream"** Vanguard [Import]

Larkin has all but abandoned writing conventional start-middle-end song. As for melody, there's little here that can be categorised thus. Nowadays Larkin uses, principally, guitars and percussion to create atmospheric sounds and rhythmic textures, while her lyrics lean toward impressionistic aggregations of words. Apart from songs such as "Just A Few Words," there are precious few evolving verses. Rather, each line is an individual snapshot. It's certainly different, but hardly makes satisfying fare.

Peter Mulvey **"The Trouble With Poets"** Signature Sounds [Import]

The trouble with this poet is he employs words to create lines and verses whose precise meaning are hard to discern. It all smacks of the lyric is an art form, as opposed to a creation that informs. Unless, that is – there is no real meaning to anything Mulvey writes. A difficult one to call. Try **Fish Records**. Stateside, www.signaturesounds.com

Kate McDonnell **"Don't Get Me Started"** Dog Eared Discs [Import]

Andrew Calhoun's Waterbug label, now Oregon based [and still very much alive], played host to Kate's solo debut and sophomore release. This time around she's taken the self-release route. On the front liner there's a mischievous grin on her face as Kate toys with a hand grenade. In spite of that, it's quite apparent from the lines "*it's groceries, kids, god, nintendo, summer doors would winter shut, nothing's different here*" from *Gone*, that this girl has a firm grasp of the realities of daily routine. And that's the problem - in "*everyone dies, but not everyone lives,*" Kate alludes to the principle of always living life to its fullest extent - before, that is, its *Gone*. After expressing, in the opening verse, an almost uncontrollable yearning for *Sticky Buns*, the second provides the unexpurgated recipe. Delivered with a bluesy swagger [and undoubtedly a twinkle in her eyes], the closing verse concludes that you can deduce much about the nature of a man, by the way he devours *Sticky Buns*. Say that it isn't so. McDonnell is a contemporary writer and acoustic performer who, at particular junctures on this collection, reminded me vocally of Patty Larkin, the late Kate Wolf and early career Dar Williams, with a dash of Christine Lavin when it comes to lyrical humour. While they didn't shake the foundations of my world, Kate songs witnessed a couple of mild tremors. Available from **P.O. Box 437, Slingerlands, NY 12159, U.S.A.**

Amy Rigby "The Sugar Tree" Koch [Import]

Recorded in Nashville, this collection, Amy's third, is nothing more or less than competent, melodic, and at times ballsy, pop/rock. Available in the UK via Koch Distribution..

Lucie Blue Tremblay "Because Of You" Maggie & Shanti Musique [Import]

French Canadian *torch* singer returns after a four-year hiatus. As usual there's a couple of songs delivered in French, including the opening Yvan Pio penned "La Voie Douce [The Gentle Path]." The twelve remaining songs were composed by Tremblay ; two are collaborations with Daniel Loyer, who co-produced the album. There's also some CDROM multimedia content on the disc. Available from www.luciebluetremblay.com

John McCutcheon "Storied Ground" Philo [Import]

The facet of life that I most detest in these troubled times is the cult of personality. We all partake in the worship of personality, to a greater or lesser extent. We are voyeurs, who voraciously swallow what we are fed by the world's press. McCutcheon's "Vultures" - a prayer for sanity to replace our current penchant for stupidity - says it 1000% better than any words I could compose. And it's only one of twelve good reasons, honest and true, why you need to listen to this man's "**Storied Ground.**" Available from www.rounder.com

Erin McKeown "Distillation" Signature Sounds [Import]

This is a curious little item. I'd like to think that it lands somewhere between conventionality and the areas of music trawled by Ani DiFranco and say, Christine Lavin - but only heaven really knows. There's a deal of scat singing, a Rodgers & Hart cover, on some tracks - a minimalist approach to instrumentation, while oodles of recording session fun appears to have been had by all involved. As for Erin's fashion sense, the emphasis remains

curious [and quirky], in an early career Gilbert O'Sullivan kind of way. Available from **Fish Records**. In the USA it's www.signaturesounds.com

Christy McWilson "The Lucky One" Hightone [Import]

The Picketts broke up and Christy McWilson, lead singer/principal composer, enlisted Dave Alvin to produce a solo album. "The Lucky One" opens an album that features ten more of her tunes, plus a cover of Brian Wilson's "Til I Die." Some solid back-beat rockers, a slice of Sahm styled Tex/Mex, classic country heartbreakers and ballads - they're all here.

Peter Nelson "Days Like Horses" Signature Sounds [Import]

Subtitled "**A Novel In Fifteen Songs,**" Nelson's compositions explore the dissolution of a [real life] relationship, and he is supported, musically, in this endeavour by Patty Larkin, Dar Williams, Susan Werner, Cliff Eberhardt, Ben Demerath and Peter Mulvey. Despite the intensely serious nature of many of the lyrics, one of the most powerful weapons in Nelson's arsenal is humour. Employing that skill [and also a modicum of irony], "The Ballad of Eddie Gay" and "Good Sushi On Jupiter" help redress the balance, while "The Home Team" is one of the finest and fondest recollections ever dedicated to the simple days of childhood. Available in the UK from **Fish Records**. Stateside, try www.signaturesounds.com

Pierce Pettis "Everything Matters" Compass Records [Import]

On solo album number six Pierce opens, yet again, with a song composed by his friend, the late [and great] Mark Heard. That makes three albums in a row. In this instance, it's *Tip of My Tongue*. I guess the repetition boils down to *keeping faith* with your beliefs. And Pettis, from a musical and religious perspective certainly possesses *faith in spades*. The same could be said of Heard who, in 1991, produced Pierce's **Tinseltown. Everything Matters** was produced by Gordon Kennedy and features three tunes they composed together. On another trio of cuts, Pettis shares the writing credits with Fred Koller, the Chicago born, Nashville based hit song-smith, while Sally Barris and Robert Ellis Orrall collaborated with Pierce on one song each. Never one to pull his punches *God Believes in You* and *Kingdom Come*, acknowledge the man's, aforementioned, profound Christian beliefs. The paean *Just Like Jim Brown (She is History)*, a reflection on knowing when precisely to *walk away* [for example, from a career or love affair], is the ace in a classy suite of eleven originals. By way of totally eliminating the possibility of confusion, this recording was originally a Stateside release in 1998. Available from **Compass Records, 117 30th Avenue South, Nashville, Tennessee 37212, U.S.A.** or, in the U.K. via **RMG Distribution**.

Andi Neate "Icarus" Plant-Life Records [Import]

From the wistful, jazz tinged opening, delivered by Steve Kettley's soprano sax, this is a hard one to call. A case of *almost there*. Lyrically, Andi is a relationship kind of girl, with a tendency toward instilling obtuse story-line references into her lyrics. That's not to say that her intended meaning is hard to define. *I'm Undone*, finds the

narrator in love and indulging in self-analysis and expressions of self-doubt, while she adopts a “*take it or leave it*” stance in *My Life*. The prudent use of trumpet, piano, percussion, cello, mandolin, fiddle and double bass, in various combinations, has the effect of adding flavour and colour to each track and to the overall feel, of what is presumably Andi's debut recording. Mainly upbeat acoustic folk/jazz best describes the overall result. As far as the arrangements are concerned, albeit on a minimalist level, at times I was reminded of a recording titled, **Bryter Layter**. Sadly her website and the literature that accompanied this recording provide little insight into the life and influences of Edinburgh based, Andi Neate. Unlike that foolhardy soul, *Icarus*, whose vain attempt to reach the sun is chronicled in the closing cut, Neate's album is a tidy, work-person-like affair. One, that holds promise of her further and future development as a songwriter of telling worth. Available from **Plant-Life Records, c/o Cruachan Cottage, Dundonnell, By Garve, Ross-Shire, Scotland IV23 2RZ**.

Rosalie Sorrels “**No Closing Chord**” Red House Records [Import]

A considerable portion of the 32 pages of liner notes that accompanied the recently released Smithsonian tribute to Malvina Reynolds, **Ear To The Ground**, were penned by Sorrels. Rosalie also compiled the near two dozen songs featured on that collection. On this, Nina Gerber produced, thirteen-track tribute, subtitled **The Songs Of Malvina Reynolds**, Rosalie raises her own voice in celebration of Malvina's creations. Well, almost. The opening pair of tracks include, Rosalie's narration of the Jane Voss poem *Visitation*, a recollection written eight years after Malvina's passing, and the Janet Smith song *A Little Muscle*. The lyric to the latter tune is both a personal and a poignant insight, since Smith toured with Reynolds as her driver and accompanist. Voss' poem refers to Reynolds' songs as being *hand made*, and seven cuts featured on **Ear To The Ground** are re-interpreted here by Sorrels. Superficially Malvina's lyrics appear simple, but her skill lay in getting directly to the heart of the matter by synthesising the ills that we humans inflict upon one another through the use of inventive story-lines that drew the listener in. They still do, though some of this humanitarian's song portraits require knowledge of the contemporary event that inspired them. The legion of players adding their instrumental and vocal contributions to this finely balanced collection, include Terry Garthwaite [ex Joy of Cooking], Laurie Lewis, Bonnie Raitt and, of course, Gerber. Reynolds passed on in 1978. Wednesday 23rd August 2000 will mark the hundredth anniversary of her birth in San Francisco. Red House Records and the Smithsonian Folkways label are to be congratulated for issuing these timely *lest we forget* tributes to Malvina Reynolds, a truly original spirit and folk music pioneer. Available from **Red House Records, 501 West Lynnhurst Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota 55104, U.S.A.** or, in the U.K. via **Koch Distribution**.

Larry Long “**Well May The World Go**” Smithsonian Folkways Recordings [Import]

Songs Of Work, Love, Community And Hope is the subtitle of this twelve- song collection, that purposefully relates the life struggle of citizens in other lands, many of whom, for various reasons, have settled in America. Once resident Stateside their trial is not necessarily over, as

Down With The Ku Klux Klan and other songs here attest. Drawn from interviews that Long conducted, many of the lyrics are delivered, verbatim, in the first person. As each story unfolds, scenes of war, poverty and hardship constantly resurface. Primarily, the songs are a testament to the human spirit's ability to deal with adversity. The protagonists, once settled in America, have consistently adopted a role of assisting fellow nationals to gain entry to the new world. Hispanics travel to the northern states in search of work, when they discover that there are *No Jobs In Texas*. A heartrending tale, *Somalia*, opens with Mohammed Hassan's birth into a rich and noble family. Decades later, he flees his homeland, with his wife and children, when democracy degenerates into a civil war waged by feudal warlords. Over a number of centuries the Hmong people, who originated in China, spread south into Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Recruited to fight in the Vietnam war, following the American withdrawal, the Hmong in Laos and Vietnam have been subjected to a campaign of genocide. Yang Chang, who lost a leg in the war, counts himself lucky to have made it *All The Way To Paradise* with his family. *Brazil* and *Muscovite Feel All Right* recall equally real human situations, in other lands. Long finely balances those *foreign excursions* with an inward look at his homeland, and the voice of the Native American, in *Some Things Are Not For Sale*. While *this land is your land* may a firmly held conviction Stateside, to the Native American *the land* is a communally held treasure that every man is given in trust during his time on earth. As for the title track, it features the voice of the redoubtable Pete Seeger reminiscing about truth and the power of ordinary people to determine the destiny of mankind. This extraordinary work is available from **Smithsonian Folkways Mail Order, 955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 7300, Washington, DC 20560-0953, U.S.A.**

Claudia Schmidt “**Wings Of Wonder**” Red House Records [Import]

It rises, it swoops, but most of all, it is pure and crystal clear – Schmidt's voice, that is. Following a six-year hiatus, *Somebody Else's Restaurant* humorously hints at one of Claudia's real-life occupations since the mid-nineties. Schmidt has favoured the dulcimer as her *instrument of choice*, for much of her twenty-year performing career. On this recording she also tastefully employs a 12-string acoustic guitar. The melody of Schmidt's instrumental *Peter And Lois Go Round And Round*, a gentle waltz, strays uncomfortably close to that of David Mansfield's *Heaven's Gate Waltz*. *The Moon Winked At Hale Bopp*, another instrumental with wordless vocal, is Claudia's reminiscence of a terrestrial event she witnessed during a late night journey. Lest you conclude that this work is principally instrumental in content, on *My One And Only Love*, a cover, Schmidt delivers a slow paced, emotion filled, jazz inflected vocal. While the final selection, *Livingstone's Farewell*, a song of parting, is delivered with the heartfelt rider, “*when it's time to come back home, this Island will be here.*” Available from **Red House Records, 501 West Lynnhurst Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota 55104, U.S.A.** or, in the U.K. via **Koch Distribution**.

Various “**This Is Boston, Not Austin: Vol. 2**” Eastern Front/Black Wolf Records [Import]

One disc in this double disc set features spoken contributions from a handful of Boston poets, as well as contributions from Ellis Paul and Peter Mulvey. The sixteen song second disc includes tunes by Ellis Paul, Jennifer Kimball, Peter Mulvey, Jess Klein and Vance Gilbert. Available from **Eastern Front Records, 7 Curve Street, Medfield, Massachusetts 02052, U.S.A.**

Various **"Badlands – A Tribute To Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska"** Sub Pop [Import]

Having survived an avalanche of, consistently less than worthwhile, compilation recordings that focused on the catalogue of some long gone chart band, or an aggregation that had once been the delight of some *well informed critic*, the latest ploy is to record the entire contents of a classic album. The greater the fame of [original] artist, the greater the chance of reaping a [considerable] financial harvest. Twenty years after the birth of Springsteen's stark and chilling masterwork, comes this creditable tribute, including covers of three songs from the original sessions not on the original disc. The featured performers include Dar Williams, Ani DiFranco and Los Lobos. Available from **Village Records**.

Various **"Til We Outnumber Them"** Righteous Babe [Import]

Four years of persistence pays off. Ani DiFranco's label has finally released this "live" Woody Guthrie tribute recording made at a couple of shows in Cleveland, Ohio during September 1996 and featuring Woody tunes rendered by Arlo, Pete Seeger, Billy Bragg, Bruce Springsteen and others.

Various **"Folk Scene Collection Volume 2"** Red House [Import]

Following a debacle at California's KPFK-FM last autumn, the Larman's are thankfully now back on-air Stateside, c/o WUMB in Boston, Mass. This disc includes contributions from Nanci Griffith, Tom Russell, Lucinda Williams, Eliza Gilkyson and Patty Larkin. Available in UK via Koch Distribution.

Laura Nyro **"Live From Mountain Stage"** Blue Plate [Import]

I suppose you have to ask the question - if Nyro were still alive would these recordings have seen the light of day? Cut during a November 1990 appearance on the nationally syndicated, West Virginia based radio show, Laura kicks off with the Phil Spector/Hank Hunter tune "Oh Yeah Maybe Baby" – which opened her 1993 album **"Walk The Dog & Light The Light."** Two other selections for that set and half a dozen cuts from the 1989 **"Live At The Bottom Line"** recording appear here. The covers segue of "Let It Be Me" and "The Christmas Song" are the only items previously unrecorded by Nyro..

John Gorka **"The Company You Keep"** Red House [Import]

Stoically serious, as ever, Gorka credits the production of his latest collection to two Polish guys and a Ukranian. John is one of the former. This time around, applying his own unique twist, Gorka's words reflect upon subjects such as married life ["Over There"], growing old - without much

grace, that is ["People My Age"] and the break up of a marriage ["When You Walk In"]. Available in the UK via Koch Distribution. In the USA, try **Village Records**.

Brooks Williams **"Skiffle Bop"** Signature Sounds [Import]

Following in wake of last year's, instrumental only, collection **"Little Lion,"** comes **"Skiffle-Bop"** a vocal and instrumental cocktail - a mix of country-blues, swing and [bebop] jazz - from one of the most fluid acoustic/electric guitarists on the planet. Seven Williams' originals are featured along with four covers from writers such as Pat Buchanan [The Blue Nile], Pat Metheny and T Bone Burnett. Available from **Fish Records** in the UK. In the USA, try www.signaturesounds.com

Ron Sexsmith And The Uncool **"Grand Opera Lane"** no label [Import]

Produced by Blue Rodeo alumni, Bob Wiseman, the recording sessions for **"Grand Opera Lane"** began in 1987 and stretched over the ensuing four years. Sexsmith's self-titled solo debut appeared in 1995. The eleven originals here, one co-written with Wiseman, rock a little harder than the laid back Sexsmith that we subsequently learned to love. The already familiar "Speaking With The Angel," plus "Trains" and "Tell You" are the only tracks to hint at Sexsmith's future melodic magic. For completists only. Available from www.maplemusic.com

David Olney **"Omar's Blues"** Dead Reckoning [Import]

This fourteen track song cycle is divided into three segments, "Omar In Love" "Reverend Omar" and "Omar In Hollywood." "Omar's Blues # 1" which kicks of the opening segment is reminiscent of Buddy Holly's "Words of Love." "Blues # 2" and "Blues # 3" introduce the subsequent parts. This disc ranks as one of Olney's best ever albums.

Kristina Olsen & Peter Grayling **"Duet"** Take A Break [Import]

Having resorted to self-releasing her recordings, I finally caught up with Olsen's latest work when she played locally last autumn. Supported by Grayling's cello, **"Duet"** features a reinterpretation of one of Kristina's best, "My Father's Piano" and a couple of new keepers including "Already Gone." Available from **Take A Break Productions, P.O. Box 21, Venice, California 90294-0021, U.S.A.**

Kristina Olsen [with Peter Grayling] **"The Truth of A Woman"** Take a Break [Import]

Track 4, "The Yellow Piper," tells of a woman who eventually fulfils her dream of becoming a licensed pilot. It's also one of the best songs you'll ever hear. A heartfelt five and a half minute movie. For that reason and ten others, including a *live* version of Dave Dodson's amusing and sexually charged "Big O," this album is an essential purchase. Source in review above.

The Original Harmony Ridge Creekdippers **"My Own Jo Ellen"** Glitterhouse [Import]

Four albums in as many years from the Creekdippers is all fine and dandy, except their music was uniquely quirky and full of charm first time around. It is now repetitious and passe. Available from **Glitterhouse Records, Gruner Weg 25, 37688 Beverungen, Germany.**