

NEW RELEASES

Rayna Gellert OLD LIGHT: SONGS FROM MY CHILDHOOD AND OTHER GONE WORLDS

Independent

★★★★★

In record time, this quiet release fits like a well-worn pair of favourite leather shoes

This might be one of the best albums ever that nobody's ever heard of. All the more an accomplishment, given that it marks Gellert's true solo debut (discounting a 4-song Merlefest Live EP and an earlier collection of like-minded players from 2000). Chances are good you don't know her, but she earned some much-deserved attention for her part in the second coming of the groundbreaking Uncle Earl, originally formed in 2002, rebuilt in 2004 and disbanded five years later. You'll hear Gellert's strong influence on both Rounder releases and you'll realise it here across five powerful originals and five reinvented traditional songs. Powerful—like she's been writing all her life. With a warm, endearing voice that rolls off her lips like she's also been singing all her life. She hasn't—and barely considers herself a singer, surrounding herself here with fellow Co-Dependent Scott Miller (of Commonwealth fame), guitarist Nathan Salsburg, ex-Earl Girl Abigail Washburn and the legendary Alice Gerrard.

A longtime stringband student, Gellert grew up in North Carolina in a musical family and OLD LIGHT does her upbringing proud. Elaborate artwork (Gellert is barely identified on the packaging) speaks volumes about the content—the entire package a distinctive labour of love with deceptively complex arrangements and a simple takeaway. Peculiar instrumentation only helps to disorient the listener while setting up the impact from each song. Concert bass drum and trumpet join banjo and guitar as Rayna sings the opening *Nothing* with all the energy of a death march. Strong imagery and lyrics with obscured meaning—yet it proves entirely captivating. Yet to pick up her main instrument, Gellert continues singing with *In The Ocean* with its harp-like guitar, eerie pedal steel and mercurial banjo while its sad chorus ebbs and flows like the waves. Pain has never sounded so refreshing. The fiddle comes out for *The Platform*, a gently swinging, guitar and fiddle-driven original



with harmonies from Leah Abramson. Its lyrics are thought-provoking and frustrating in their obscurity but each adds to the undeniable rhythm of the overall composition. The traditional *1845* is a time-trip worth taking, its bass guitar lines and Salsburg's reliable guitar setting the stage while Gellert's fiddle and Jon Estes' pedal steel establish slightly surreal atmospherics. By the time the drums kick in, the piece is sold and its impact thoroughly present tense. Consider the wonder of *The Cruel Mother*, delivered a cappella—atop little more than a continuous fiddle drone—loaded with a level of sadness that digs deep and packs a hurtful wallop. Switching gears away from murder ballads, the comparably up-tempo original, *The Stars*, B3, piano and crisp drums mark the pace while the combined vocal strengths of Gellert and Scott Miller make for a powerful blend. The twisted sound effects employed on the traditional *Fatal Flower Garden*, lend an element of Hitchcockian intrigue. More Seegerisms come into play with *Old Bangum*, proving to be positively upbeat thanks to its sprightly pacing by Rayna's brother Dan on banjo and Jamie Dick's drumming while Estes' B3 paints pictures in the background. A more aggressive original in *Fly To Me* ascends, musically, with its aura of pedal steel, heavy-handed percussive effects and Jeff Keith's soaring electric guitar. Yet this song, along with all the others, sound to be from the same pen. Painfully lonely. Heartbreakingly sad. Yet far from depressing, despite their tone and content. How this can be possible on a debut release can only speak of great promise for the future from Rayna Gellert and her darkly infectious vision. Simple. Relaxed. Unadorned. Unforgettable.

Eric Thom

www.raynagellert.com

Sara Hickman SHINE

Kirtland Records

★★★★★

Employing several tempos, Sara's SHINE is a folk-pop exploration

Austin-based Sara Hickman's ten-song SHINE, is her debut collection for the Dallas, Texas imprint Kirtland Records, founded by John Kirtland, drummer for 1990's hit-makers Deep Blue Something. The album was recorded in Los Angeles,



and produced, engineered and mixed by Jim Jacobsen, who was one of the credited producers of Hickman's SPIRITUAL APPLIANCES. The principal contributors here are Hickman (vocals, acoustic/electric guitars, pencil tapping and kalimba) and Jacobsen (acoustic/electric 6 & 12-string guitars, mandolin, electric mandola, electric basses, found, junk and guitar case percussion, programming, kalimba, horn arrangements, clarinets, accordion, keyboards and backing vocals) with minor additions by others.

Co-written with regular collaborator Colin Boyd, who recorded his contribution in his Dallas home, the album begins with the melodically robust, lyrically fun-filled *Tasty Sweet*—'You're the kind of boy I'd love to eat.' Of the remaining songs, Sara penned four, and with Jacobsen co-wrote five. Supported by Matt Cory (upright bass), Michael Bimbryer (saxophone) and Josh Aguiar (trumpet), the second selection *Selfish Freak* is one of the former. Therein introduced by kalimba, at the outset the narrator shoots straight from the hip: 'This room is full of so much crap, the remnants of your hardened heart, I keep a trippin' up on your yesterdays, when you fooled me with your smile.'

Trouble With Boxes is a slyly worded affair sic. 'I never fit in' and 'The trouble with being dead, you end up in a box.' The Jacobsen co-write, *Human Wish*, takes place on an airplane journey. We learn that he is a handsome Mexican, married with two young sons, while she has a 'husband and her kids at home.' Striking up a conversation, she fantasises of 'The fleeting promise in a stranger's eyes, And what could be just for an afternoon' and enquires (of herself) 'Is this a sinner's heart or a human wish to touch someone that you just met, Skin on skin and fingertips.' Hickman has always excelled at the lyrically spiritual, and the five-minute plus *You Are Not Alone* joins a long, long line of timeless classics. In terms of energy level, vocals and instruments, Sara progressively puts the pedal to the metal and rocks on *Cocky Friend* and the ensuing *Primitive Stuff*. Another co-write, and the album's shortest selection at two minutes plus, Cory and Aguiar contribute to the gentle keyboard led *Rapture*. Cory's bass also features on the seasonal and nearly symphonic *Two Winters*, while there's vocal support from daughter io, husband Lance Schriener, and friend Andrea Perry on the rhythmically

strident, percussion propelled closer *Shine*— 'When you lift your voice you can choose to shine.' **Arthur Wood**

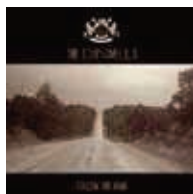
www.sarahickman.com

The Dunwells FOLLOW THE ROAD

Concord
0888072343283

★★★★★

A gutsy debut from a British rock act that would sit well on country radio or CMT



As the name implies, Leeds band The Dunwells is a family affair, comprising brothers Joe and David Dunwell, cousins Jonny Lamb and Rob Clayton and school friend Dave Hanson. While I have dubbed them a rock band from the north of England, they have been busy touring US cities such as Los Angeles, Austin and New Orleans with their unique brand of self-penned Americana, while still playing gigs in their native land. The album opens with the title track, also the band's first single, whose psychedelic sitar sounds, choppy acoustic guitar and CSNY-style harmonies soon give way to Jonny Lamb's vociferous drums. The 1960s West Coast influence also shows on *Hand That Feeds*, with its insistent rhythm, jerky electric guitar licks, urgent lead vocal and catchy chorus harmonies. An entirely different tone is ushered in by *Goodnight My City*, a soft mid-tempo acoustic meditation on urban life, and the mood mellows further with the enchanting *Only Me*, once again employing sweet five-part harmonies and gentle acoustic guitars to frame some tasteful electric fills. The pace picks up with *So Beautiful*, and the band's proficiency with up-tempo numbers is further displayed on *I Could Be A King*, whose double-time acoustic guitar provides a framework on which to hang well-placed electric guitar chords. *Elizabeth* is a well-arranged, steel-tinged ballad that would make a solid single.

The album breaks for a reflective three-track acoustic section, starting with *Oh Lord*, a mournful tale of lost love which sees the high-harmony vocals take on a darker tone to the accompaniment of delicate guitar picking. *Saving Grace* is the closest the band comes to a country song, a fine waltz-styled tale of love and devotion that finds the trademark harmonies at their loveliest, while *Blind Sighted Faith* brings the tempo back on course in preparation

for a spirited album closer, the complex relationship piece *Perfect Timing*. While my weakness for sweet ballads and beautiful vocal harmonies means that *Only Me*, *Oh Lord* and especially *Saving Grace* are my album favourites, there's no doubt that The Dunwells can rock out too, with the title track, *Hand That Feeds* and *I Could Be A King* being the best examples. I imagine the band is a wow live, so as well as checking out this fine debut CD, you might also want to follow them...on the road. **Jeremy Isaac**

www.thedunwells.com

The Deadly Gentlemen ROLL ME, TUMBLE ME

Rounder 1161-9174-
2PA

★★★★★

A scintillating third offering and major label debut from Boston's vibrant bluegrass/roots quintet



This is the third outing for the Boston, Massachusetts-based quintet following their highly-acclaimed self-released albums *THE BASTARD MASTERPIECE* (2008) and *CARRY ME TO HOME* (2011). They now make their long-awaited major label debut on Rounder. The Gentlemen boast a prestigious pedigree, various members having cut their teeth with such household names as 'Boss' Bruce Springsteen, bluegrass legend Jessie McReynolds and mandolin master David Grisman—in fact Grisman's son, Sam, plays bass here—as well as boasting some early heavy metal influences. But *ROLL ME, TUMBLE ME* is a far cry from thrash or the Jersey Shore sound, instead presenting ten tastefully performed and arranged bluegrass originals penned by group leader and banjo picker Greg Liszt.

Cut variously in Boston and a makeshift studio in a private house in the aptly-named Eclectic, Alabama, the album opens on the up-tempo title track, pairing Dominick Leslie's sleek banjo lines with Mike Barnett's busy fiddle while Grisman's bass rumbles ominously beneath.

Bored Of The Raging, the album's first single, starts off at a funereal pace but soon picks up speed as Liszt and Barnett's banjo and fiddle run wild over Stash Wyslouch's chugging acoustic guitar, while the plodding title track features finely-timed five-part harmonies and gently plucked banjo and mandolin. *A Faded Star* opens

with a slow start with more trademark harmonies before the busy string instruments take off once more.

On the balladic side, the dreamy, enchanting *Beautiful's Her Body* shows the band at its best with sensational harmonies and lilting fiddle, and these sweet vocals are again showcased on the slightly faster *It'll End Too Soon*, which would also make a solid single. My album favourite is the lovely *Now Is Not The Time*, its measured banjo and fiddle and catchy, perfectly timed chorus building to a strong, but understated foot-tapping close that retains the song's ambience. The album concludes with the wistful, up-tempo *Falsehearted Anthem*, as the now-familiar mix of racey banjo and fiddle carries the vocals home. For me the top tunes here are the slower, beautifully delivered harmony showcases, *Body*, *It'll End Too Soon* and *Now Is Not The Time*, but the faster numbers are also outstanding. The Deadly Gentleman have brought us a virtuoso collection of masterfully performed bluegrass originals on an album that deserves to find success in spades. Perhaps Rounder will pick up their previous albums too—these guys need to be heard. **Jeremy Isaac**

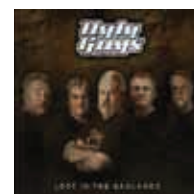
www.deadlygentlemen.com

The Ugly Guys LOST IN THE BADLANDS

Angel Air SJPCD422

★★★★★

Country-rock gets a new look



There are lots of bands around trying hard to sound like something they're not. The Ugly Guys just go with a gut feeling and it works a treat. Breathless and unstoppable, the band rock through a set of mostly self-penned numbers that pay homage to the Byrds, Gram Parsons and many more, without getting caught up in it. Instead, the result is laced with the irrepressible feel of Southend and Canvey Island, where they're from—and not a little feel of the Kursaal Flyers, where singer Paul Shuttleworth and pedal steel player Vic Collins were also from.

Heart River Falls is pure Burritos, *Wrong Side Of Memphis* and *A Man's Gotta Do* rock hard, amid a welter of Dobro, mandolin and piano while *Annie Oakley Hat* has the playfulness of the Kursaals, and even the beauty of the mandolin-laced *Your Alibi* has a solid beat. The title track, meanwhile, is