

**Steve Earle
TOWNES**
New West
★★★★☆

Tribute from one country legend to another

This is an album that Steve Earle was perhaps destined to make, ever since Townes van Zandt died in 1997. This album is a full-blown tribute with 15 van Zandt songs, and while not quite a Greatest Hits—there's no *Waiting Around To Die* or *Tecumseh Valley* for instance—is still a pretty fair introduction for the neophyte, if such people exist. The problem with covering his songs though, as with Gram Parsons, is that van Zandt himself pretty much laid down the definitive versions, leaving little for others to embellish or innovate. Earle recognises this, and for the main takes the songs straight with the little in the way of addition or diversion. He's helped by having the sort of gravel-wrecked and lived-in voice that can lend a touch of authenticity to the heart-breaking *Marie* and van Zandt's best known song, *Pancho and Lefty*. The exceptions, which are also the best tracks, are an unexpectedly ferocious assault on the apocalyptic *Lungs* and an almost jaunty *Mr. Mudd and Mr. Gold*, where he trades verses with son Justin Townes Earle.

Van Zandt was known for his darkness and despair but Earle doesn't neglect his lighter side with a hoedown style *White Freightliner Blues* and a foot-stomping *Loretta*. He also closes the album with *To Live Is To Fly*, van Zandt's hopeful but realistic anthem to everyday life.

Overall there's not a dud track here, but this feels more like a personal project than a commercial one. Earle's straight versions of the songs are good, but van Zandt's are better and there isn't enough experimentation a la *Lungs* to make the album an essential buy. Anything that raises van Zandt's profile and keeps his memory alive is a good thing but five minutes on iTunes for the album standouts will be a better investment for most people than five minutes on Amazon. JS
www.steveearle.com



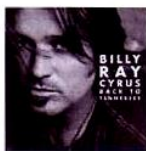
Alive, Salvo, Hard Time Killing Floor Blues, Lost At Sea, Nightmares, Hold On To Your Love, Concept Of Irony, Freedom and The River Merchant's Wife. Sean Taylor has a way with words, sure. But his way for guitars is very much impressive on its own. And, well place him in a room with a bunch of guitars, a microphone, keyboards a drum kit and a harmonica and right there and then you have created the master of the one-man-band and the masterpiece of an album that is *CALCUTTA GROVE*.

A London musician, Sean Taylor's third release really galvanises his place on the London circuit as a well-stated crowd-pleaser. There are no doubts that these songs have the power to move and enchant, with their often-bluesy compositions, deep and integral lyrics and those very powerful guitar riffs. His voice is bluesy also, and this creates a hypnotic atmosphere that charms. This is a wonderful album, my favourite tracks have to be the opener *Calcutta Grove* and *Lost At Sea*. Take a look at his website – watch some videos of him and you'll see what I see. One fascinating performer, with real passion. LB
www.seantaylorsongs.com

**Billy Ray
Cyrus
BACK TO
TENNESSEE**
Lyric Street
Records 699-1222
★★★★

Somewhat disappointing return to Nashville marred by over-production

In some respects the unprecedented success of *Achy Breaky Heart*, which topped America's country chart for five weeks in 1992, proved to be something of a double-edged sword for Billy Ray. On the one hand it propelled him from virtual obscurity into becoming little short of a household name, worldwide, while on the other there were a considerable number of country fans who felt that they could not take him seriously. This is a pity, because *SOME GAVE IT ALL*, his debut, was a strong country offering which eventually sold somewhere in the region of 9 million copies. Since then his recording career has been somewhat patchy but the fact remains that he has released some strong country albums. Of course, his talent as an



actor has been recognised. The father of Miley Cyrus, he plays the on-screen father and manager of Miley in the phenomenally successful *Hannah Montana*.

Now, despite his big screen and TV success, Cyrus returned to Nashville to record his eleventh studio album, *BACK TO TENNESSEE*. It would be a gross exaggeration to claim that this is a classic country album but it would be equally unfair to suggest that Cyrus is attempting to ride on the coat-tails of his daughter's success despite the fact that she joins him on two tracks. The album has its strengths and weaknesses but, overall, it turns out to be something of a disappointment. This can be blamed on a measure of inconsistency. Too often, producer Mark Bright has, presumably in an attempt to reach a wider audience, furnished Cyrus with unnecessarily overblown instrumentation. On a number of potentially good songs he would have been far better stripping things down and allowing Billy Ray to express himself more convincingly than he has been able to do when swamped by sanitised rock backings and a barrage of strings and things.

Vocally, Cyrus himself is somewhat inconsistent. He oscillates between a throaty growl and rather innocuous mellowness to a point where it is difficult to discern what the real Billy Ray Cyrus sounds like; meaning that he has not allowed himself the opportunity to prove that he could be a distinctive vocal stylist.

The third disappointment lies in the mediocrity of some of the material. Lyrically, the title track is quite commendable and Cyrus tackles it well, but it is marred by overblown production. He comes into his own on *He's Mine*, a father's proud acknowledgement that his sometimes rowdy son is a chip off the old block. Here the backing is not as cluttered as it is on some tracks, and Billy Ray grows his lyrics convincingly. He reverts to a reverential gospel approach on *Somebody Said A Prayer* which again would have benefited from a simpler backing.

Born and raised in Kentucky, when Billy Ray first arrived in Nashville he was often reduced to living out of his car. Back then he was a genuine country boy, and he attempts to convince us that he is still the same on *Country As Country Can Be*, but

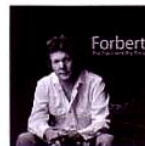
he is far less convincing on the pretty dreadful *Thrillbilly*. The best that can be said about his duet with his daughter, *Butterfly, Fly Away*, is that it is cute. Perhaps complementing this particular song is the second duet, *Ready, Set, Don't Go*, which held a lot of appeal. The point made earlier about an inconsistency in Cyrus' vocals is made manifest in the closing track, yet another rendition of *Over The Rainbow* (which has not been included on the *Stateside* release), and is possibly one reason that many country music fans have failed to take Billy Ray Cyrus seriously. LK
www.lyricstreetrecords.com

**Steve Forbert
THE PLACE
AND THE
TIME**
Freeworld
FREEM5003
★★★★☆

*Steve Forbert
being Steve
Forbert-one for the fans*

There's a British flavour to album opener *Blackbird Tune*. The setting is 'another Yorkshire June,' as the Meridian, Mississippi bred troubadour takes a leisurely stroll: 'Out on my own in this here chimney top town, I hear your song, bird, and I'm searching to see, What kind of bird might such a song singer be?' In the ensuing cut, the narrator urges an acquaintance to *Sing It Again, My Friend*, the opening verse launched by the assertion: 'Oh, the song that you sang, Means the same thing. That it did years ago.' An attempt at contemporary humour, identity theft is the theme of the lyrically flippant travelogue *Stolen Identity*, while Bekka Bramlett furnishes the backing vocal and tambourine on a number of cuts, including the slyly titled *Write Me A Raincheck*.

Co-written with session guitarist Steve Allen, a member of Forbert's recent road bands, *Who'll Watch The Sunset?* is dedicated to the narrator's girl who it appears loves: '...those gold and red streaks of sky.' Other road band members contributing to the sessions are Paul Errico and Bobby Lloyd Hicks (Dave Alvin). Forbert co-produced this collection with Robby Turner and recorded it at the latter's Turner-Up Recording in Hermitage, Tennessee. The passage of time and the zig-zag path that life sometimes takes is the lyrical theme of the up-tempo *Simply Must Move*



On, and propelled by a pounding drum beat *The Beast Of Ballyhoo (Rock Show)* amounts to the rock anthem in this set. Long a fixture on the Philadelphia music scene where he has supported Amos Lee, John Francis, Birdie Busch and Denison Witmer, Devin Greenwood penned *Building Me A Fire*. Raised in Browns Mills, New Jersey by mixed race school teacher parents, the latter song closed Greenwood's self-titled debut EP released in 2006 by Treasure Records. The only other cover song in this collection is Forbert's arrangement of the traditional *The Coo Coo Bird*.

In *Labor Day '08*, despite the upbeat melody, Forbert's *Bud Lite* consumer acerbically comments about American jobs exported abroad, and at home targets those: 'kings and queens' who reside in 'private, gated, subdivision things.' The closing numbers *Hang On Again Till The Sun Shines (NYC)* and *Blue, Clear Sky* share a deal of lyrical melancholy and both find time to mention the Big Apple. The subjective thrust of the former is pretty much explained by the title, the word 'cold' being repeatedly applied to the climate and the citizens. In the latter title, relative to those he cares most about, the narrator intones that currently they: 'Have got their backs against the wall.' In the closing verse of *Blue, Clear Sky* there's allusion to 9/11: 'Since we all saw the landmarks fall, And in the big, Western world lotsa flags unfurled, In the wake of the wake up call.' Does Jack Hardy sound like Steve Forbert, or is it a case of vice versa? AW
www.steveforbert.com

**Bruce
Cockburn
SLICE O LIFE—
LIVE SOLO**
True North TND520
★★★★

Veteran Canadian folk-rockers in solo acoustic mode

Bruce Cockburn is a Canadian institution. The veteran folk-rockers has just completed forty years in music and this is his 29th release and fourth live album. A double acoustic cut, it contains twenty-one tracks, a selection of stories, and an unnecessary opening track consisting solely of 45 seconds of applause.

