

Drops (*Sittin' On Top Of The World*), Danny Barnes (the Bad Livers, the Barnburners), Madeleine Peyroux, Bruce Cockburn and the legendary John Hammond. **AW**
www.blackhenmusic.com/album/things-about-comin-my-way

Various Artists RARE BLUEGRASS FROM NASHVILLE T-Bird 0010CD

★★★★

Classic stuff, and from names you may not have heard of...

A 28-track collection which combines forgotten but, mainstream tracks with some truly grassroots recordings. The former, from the Spar label, is mostly the Story story—the tale of fiddler Carl Story, who was right up there with Flatt & Scruggs and Bill Monroe in moving bluegrass from the backwoods into the college and festival circuit in the 1960s and 1970s. Having played in Monroe's band pre-WWII, created 'gospel bluegrass' with his band the Rambling Mountaineers and then recorded for Columbia in the 1950s he returned to his bluegrass roots for the album *THE BLUEGRASS SOUND OF CARL STORY* in 1956, from which the opening 10 tracks here were taken. The result is as classic a bluegrass sound as you'll get, an irrepressible mix of fiddle and banjo instrumentals (not least a breakneck *Orange Blossom Special*) and self-penned songs, 'cheatin' weepies such as *Action Speaks Louder Than Words*, which veer across into traditional country fare. The other notable Spar track from this era is *The Now Generation's* enthusiastic *Duellin' Banjos*, which Eric Weissberg had a hit with in 1972 when his version was featured in the movie *Deliverance*.

The rest of the album is a grab-bag of tracks from Nashville's anything-goes Sur-Speed label, by artists who were rarely heard of again. There's Tom James' jolly *Further Back In The Doghouse*, a four-track EPs worth by the Pinetop Ramblers, and various others. High point is the half a dozen by the Wade Family, slower, doomy and with a splendidly spartan Luke the Drifter gospel feel—Bright Eternal Day sounds anything but. ND
www.cherryred.co.uk

Nikki Sudden & Phil Schoenfelt GOLDEN VANITY Troubadour TRBCD009

★★★★

Prized artefact and very dusty relic from two ex-pat troubadourin' English outlaws and ever elegantly dilapidated dandies finally surfaces from a Berlin bunker Recorded in Berlin in 1998 and since lost to sea, smoke and

scratched masters this is a welcome resurrection from fabled dereliction by rock'n'roll label Easy Action's Troubadour songwriter imprint. And virtues be extolled and hats bedecked with feathers for this is a free-flowing ship encompassing many aspects, strides and tides of Sudden's work. With no traces of the dreaded vanity project, the perhaps lesser known Schoenfelt is definitely a partner in crime and no mere foil—an equal if not more so, though in a style less flagrant than Jacobites compadre Dave Kusworth.

Since that sparring partnership split asunder Sudden's solo work increasingly cavaliered across country straits only previously hinted at for better and worse (suffice to say, the *Wild Horses* on mid-1980s curio *CROWN OF THORNS* might not be the best cover version he did), hooking up with REM (minus Michael Stipe) on 1990's *THE JEWEL THIEF* and likewise Wilco on 1998's *RED BROCADE* (whose *Broken Door* is here in an earlier incarnation as *Golden Door*). Had it been released at the time, *GOLDEN VANITY* would have marked a departure of sorts as elements here hark back to those mid-1980s Jacobites days as well as the ensuing solo output, especially it's dark-eyed, hanging by a thread bearing. Bookended and interspersed with the Mott-stomp n' Thunders-boogie bawl the Dollhouse down to the Velvet Underground of *Hanoi Jane* and *Love Makes Her Shine* and experimental noise shards *Cullisport/Portcullis* via mid-album ten-minute freeform marathon *Jamboree Bag* belying Sudden's earliest work in Swell Maps and Schoenfelt's apprenticeships on Manhattan's early 1980s art-rock scene alongside Sonic Youth and Lydia Lunch (as well as Nikki and his brother Epic Soundtracks' love of Alex Chilton), it's the bedraggled balladry depicting tainted fairytales and fading dream-damned glambitions that are by far the more beguiling bounties to bear repeat begs from this banquet table. Out in the hall scurrying in and out the shadows of Crazy Horse-style gravel-paths criss-crossing country roads, *Cloak Of Virtue*, *Hangman's Daughter* and *Angel Wings* have them swapping verses, their distinctive decaying drawls draping round each other's shoulders like Bowie and Ronson in '72. Schoenfelt shares a similar disinclination for vocal exactness, intoning his narratives with a Nick Cave-like demeanour in contrast to Sudden's Dylan-y drone. His wintry *Waiting For You* is both centre-piece and contender for centre-stage, its ashen remembrances more than a cursory cast-adrift dalliance, symbolising the resonance of this recording.

It may be a cliché in a class that some would stain at least one of this pair with but this serves as fitting tribute and introduction as well as

a lost treasure trove for devotees. Acolytes will revel in eternal fan, naawww, electric courier Sudden being never more than a (blagged) round from raiding his ragged roll-call of references. Whether the blatant Bolan vocal affectations, musical and, erm, marital notices (Maria McKee once more receives a mention as on the Jacobites' *Travelling European Blues*) of *Hanoi Jane* or the love note to the Tyranno-Slider that is *Bang A Gong* as well as *Cloak Of Virtue's* lyrical allusion to old chum Mike Scott's *All The Things She Gave Me*, they're never more than endearing nods by which he is both self-referential as well as reverential ... *Jane* is seduced by the *Going To A Go Go* riff he'd earlier used on TEXAS's version of solo debut *WAITING ON EGYPT'S Back To The Coast*, Jack Ketch having more than the last lingering lung-rattle of the former's *Death Is Hanging Over Me* (a collaboration with recently deceased Roland S Howard)—as does, atmospherically, much of this recording—and *Angel Wings* resembles a more decadent *Blond Angel* from the Jacobites' late-period masterpiece *GOD SAVE US POOR SINNERS*. Throughout it's a thrilling tilt and twirl to the edge, casting eyes over crumbling coastlines, brittle but bone-shaking, bruised but unbuckled, scarred but effervescently soaked to the bone. A delightful glimpse into a decadent antechamber cluttered with the debris fallen from stained scarves and sleeves singed on flickering candles and stark romances snatched from the gutters of sidelong glances underneath someone else's stairs. **SG**
www.nikkisudden.com
www.philschoenfelt.de
www.easyaction.co.uk

Various Artists ROOTS OF RHYTHM AND BLUES—A TRIBUTE TO THE ROBERT JOHNSON ERA SPV 306722 CD

★★★★

Classic set of blues and related songs

R'n'B, in its original rather than current sense, is not the most vibrant of musical forms these days. Over-familiarity with the standards—how many times have you heard *Sweet Home Chicago*?—combined with the debasing of the form by journeyman blues-rockers and too many pub bands have seen it sink into relative obscurity. This is a pity, as the originals are still as fresh and vibrant today as they were when they were first recorded and while Rhythm and Blues Records titanic box sets remain the definitive history of the genre, for those who want to spend a bit less or can't face wading through hundred track sets this new compilation will do very nicely indeed.

Robert Johnson blazed a brief but non-more-bright trail across the

musical landscape in the mid-1930s, and his music has been at the root of all blues and much else besides from that moment on. It did not however exist in isolation and this album, by including spirituals and work songs as well as pure blues, successfully places it in its proper context. Containing twenty-five recordings by people who are either the last survivors of Robert Johnson's era like David 'Honeyboy' Edwards or, like Lonnie Pitchford, learnt from those who knew him, this is water from the deepest of wells. When Mary Pinckney sings on the spiritual *If You Miss Me*, free of artifice, auto-tune or over-emoting it's a spine-chilling and slightly eerie moment, as is Pitchford's *Terraplane Blues* and hearing Johnny 'Ned' Shines doing ... *Chicago* shows that even the most familiar of songs can have renewed power when played properly by the best.

Extensive notes, giving a decent potted history of all the tracks and setting them in proper context to Johnson, complete a fine introduction to and a proper demonstration of what blues is all about. **JS**
www.spv.de

Various ROUNDER RECORDS' 40TH ANNIVERSARY CONCERT Rounder Records

★★★★

Legendary independent roots music label celebrates four decades of success

Founded in 1970 by three Boston college students, Rounder Records has become a bastion of (mainly) American roots music and is one of the planet's premier independent record labels. Mistress of ceremonies for this celebratory concert which took place at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry House on Monday October 12 last year was our very own musician, turned movie actress, turned musician, Minnie Driver. To date Rounder/Zoe has released two albums by Driver and from her 2007 sophomore outing *SEASTORIES* she opens this compilation with renditions of the up-tempo *Cold Dark River* and the country-flavoured *Beloved*.

Drawn from the label's musically diverse roster the evening's performers were Alison Krauss & Union Station with Jerry Douglas, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Bela Fleck, and Irma Thomas—all Grammy winners in their own right—in some instances many times over. Performing *Outside People* and *Think About The Good Times* special guests Nathan & the Zydeco Cha Chas employ a high energy 'grab them by the scruff of the neck and shake them into submission' approach. Spanning two decades Rounder has released

Dusty Relics - Re-issues & Compilations

eight albums by Nathan Williams' band.

By way of promoting his Rounder debut (and recent Best Bluegrass Album Grammy winner), THE CROW/NEW SONGS FOR THE FIVE-STRING BANJO, on the night before the Grand Ole Opry celebration Steve Martin played music city's Ryman Auditorium. This compilation features a couple of selections from that performance, while drawn from their 2008 CMT CROSSROADS special Robert Plant and Alison Krauss perform *Rich Woman* from RAISING SAND their 2008 Grammy Album of the Year (and also Best Contemporary Folk/Americana Album Grammy winner). After cutting her debut solo album for Atlantic Records in 1996 she disappeared for almost a decade, but since her first Rounder release appeared in 2004 Madeleine Peyroux's star has been in the ascendancy. Taken from a 2009 Los Angeles concert, Peyroux performs *Don't Wait Too Long* and Leonard Cohen's *Dance Me To The End Of Love*.

Soul diva Irma Thomas, accompanied by her guest—New Orleans based pianist Henry Butler—performs *Don't Mess With My Man* and reprises their *River Is Waiting* collaboration from Irma's 2008 release SIMPLY GRAND. Krauss, Fleck and Carpenter also contribute two songs each to this 40th ANNIVERSARY CONCERT release, and the disc closes with the entire company performing the gospel tinged segue *Angels Watching Over Me/I'll Fly Away/Down By The Riverside*. A PBS television special of the concert will begin airing Stateside during March 2010, followed by a DVD release a couple of months later. **AW**
www.rounder.com/artist/music/default.aspx?pid=63937&aid=98204

Tift Merritt HOME IS LOUD

Blue Rose Records
BLU DP0500
★★★★☆

The Queen of Americana goes electric on live album!

I got into a bit of a slanging match in *Maverick* in 2008 when I gave a poor review to Tift Merritt's gig with her band in Nottingham. I stand by my opinion of that night that the band was too loud and tried to take the limelight away from the singer—which is a heinous crime in my book. With the European release of HOME IS LOUD I will be vindicated. This gig was recorded in 2005 in Raleigh, North Carolina with virtually the same band as in Nottingham and on this night they are all pleasantly restrained and guitar solos are mercifully only measured in tens of seconds rather than tens of amplification.

The songs, obviously, come from Tift's first two albums—BRAMBLE ROSE AND TAMBOURINE and show a remarkably mature artist for one so young. *Your Love Made a U-Turn*

is even better and feistier than the original, *Laid a Highway* is given an extra large helping of suffering that can only be found after being sung 100 or more times and *Supposed To Make You Happy* nearly reduced me to tears as soon as I heard the intro on a wailing harmonica and Tift herself; sounds on the verge of tears as she recounts her sad tale over a finely strummed guitar and occasional harmonica breaks.

Tambourine has been a personal favourite for a few years now but it's only on HOME IS LOUD that I've realised what a dirty sexy song it actually is! How else could Tift finish a live album but with the best version of *Bramble Rose* I've heard her sing? Simply beautiful. Aha! I hear you ask: 'If it's really that good why only ****½?' Well; that ½ has been the subject of a healthy debate. Mrs. H got bored with the 'call/response' on *Shadow in the Way* (which drag on) plus I would have liked to hear more chatter between songs which Tift is noted for. (It's a 5 Star album really!) **AH**

www.tiftmerritt.com
www.myspace.com/tiftmerritt

Tim Hardin PAINTED HEAD

BGO Records
BGOCD778

★★★★

An okay album from the 1970s by a once great singer-songwriter who threw it all away

Tim Hardin is often mis-cast as a folk troubadour and is best-remembered as the writer of *If I Were A Carpenter* and *The Lady Comes From Baltimore*. In the late 1960s he could have become a major star but drug addiction and personal problems prevented him from realising his true potential. This particular album was originally released by CBS in 1973 and was produced by Tony Meehan in London. The former Shadow surrounded Hardin with a top notch line-up of session players including guitarists Peter Frampton and Alun Davies, keyboardist Jean Roussel (Cat Stevens band), bass player Chris Stewart and drummer Bruce Rowland (from Joe Cocker's Grease Band) and percussionist Reebop Kwakubaaah. None of the ten songs were penned by Hardin, choosing instead to cover a varied selection from blues classics—Willie Dixon's *You Can't Judge A Book By the Cover*—then current contemporary singer-songwriters—Jesse Winchester's *Yankee Lady*—and a couple of songs by Badfinger's Pete Ham—*Perfection* and *Midnight Caller*. It was a goodly collection, but for me at the time it fell well short of what Hardin could and should've produced and all these years later I still feel the same. I just hate it when a great talent throws it away on drink, booze and other wasteful pursuits. **AC**



Various VALENTINE'S DAY ORIGINAL MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK

Big Machine
Records/Water
Tower Music NLR39182

★★★★☆

As soundtracks go, this is very good

I didn't plan it, but I actually got around to reviewing this CD on February 14, I had also watched a little bit of the Valentine's Day movie special that same morning. With the film being packed full of big name stars as well as young country singer Taylor Swift making her film acting debut, it made sense that the soundtrack album should also have some established names included. Of the country acts Willie Nelson does a wonderful version of the jazz-swing number *On The Street Where You Live* and CMT's *Can You Duet?* Season 2 winners Steel Magnolia are slightly rockier on the pop-country *Keep On Lovin' You*. Whilst on pop-country Taylor Swift gets two cuts on the album with *Jump Then Fall* and the bouncy teenybopper *Today Was A Fairy Tale* which is the end title theme to the film, whilst Jewel performs the bubbly *Stay Here Forever*.

Of the other artists, Maroon 5 perform one of the best tracks on the album with their brilliant version of *The Way You Look Tonight*, Joss Stone is excellent on *4 And 20* and I was tapping along to the fun SKA tune *Say Hey (I Love You)* by Michael Franti & Spearhead as well as *I'm In The Mood For Love* from Jools Holland and Jamiroquai. With other good tracks from artists that include Ben E. King, Diane Birch, Nat King Cole and a sweet version of *Everyday* by Sausalito Foxtrot this is a fine fun album. As with all soundtrack and compilation albums there are always some inferior tracks, but over-all the good definitely outweighs the bad. **DK**
www.valentinesdaymovie.com

The Albion Band ROCKIN' DANCE BAND

Talking Elephant
TECD154

★★★★
**Natural And
Wild**
Talking Elephant
TECD155

★★★★
Variable mid-period folk from the Guv'nor, Ashley Hutchings

Ashley Hutchings was the trailblazer, indeed founding father of the English folk-rock movement, firstly with Fairport Convention and then with the various incarnations of the Albion Band. However, in a career of forty years plus and what must be approaching a century of albums there have inevitably been some lows as well as highs and the first of these albums falls firmly into the former category.



ROCKIN' BARN DANCE is exactly what it says it is. It originates from 1988 and is actually credited to the Albion Dance Band, who, despite including Peter Zorn, Simon Care and Phil Beer are not on inspired form here. A live recording of a ceilidh, it has a lot of by-the-numbers jigs and reels that are generally predictable, even lumpen at times. It's a mystery why Hutchings' calling has been retained, as it's hard to imagine who'd want to listen to 'off you go', 'right hand star' and similar instructions, essential though they would have been on the night. There are a couple of notable moments fortunately. The surreally wonderful folk comedian Sid Kipper introduces and calls Irish Washerwoman (Dashing White Privates Dance) and generates hugely entertaining mayhem. This is immediately followed by Polly Bolton's take on *Drowned Lover*. Very much an under the radar folk singer these days, her spine-tingling voice is perfect for this haunting tale of a woman meeting her drowned sailor.

1987's NATURAL AND WILD is altogether better. Another live cut, with the inevitable line-up change—accordionist Simon Care is gone, Polly Bolton is replaced by Cathy Lesurf—it focuses on the changes to the countryside that had happened already in the early twentieth century and those were yet to come. It foreshadows the rise of eco- and green concerns with songs like *Woodlands Of England* and *Tomorrow's Too Late*, while *Laura's Song*, from Hutchings' acclaimed work setting Lark Rise To Candleford to music, recalls the times that were. In some respects the sound harks back to the early days of Fairport Convention, when their American influences were more prominent—*Big Yellow Taxi* is included here with Lesurf doing a very creditable Joni—and the music is similarly light and airy in the main.

Newcomers to the Albion Band would be better off with the classic *RISE UP LIKE THE SUN* or *THE PROSPECT BEFORE US*, but existing fans will enjoy NATURAL AND WILD. Barn dances however are best participated in rather than listened to. **JS**
www.talkingelephant.co.uk

Big & Rich GREATEST HITS

Humphreys
Records HUMPT05
★★★★★

With each and every track an absolute gem, here's to Big & Rich recording further awesome material like this

Having formed in 1998, John Rich and Kenny Alphin have carved themselves such an outstanding career that after just twelve short years are being considered by many as being one of country music's greatest pairings. Who can argue with this applause especially after listening to the release of this fifteen track album?

