

Record Reviews

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JUNIOR BROWN

Semi-Crazy (Curb)

Semi-Crazy, huh? Psychoanalysis aside, Junior Brown only has one thing to worry about -- and it's not his state of mind. We'll leave those details to the lovely Tanya Rae. It's Nashville's siren song that'll drive Junior into the drink, so to speak. But whatever temptations those Nashvegas boys carry in their black briefcases hasn't been nearly enough to throw the guit-steel master over the edge. The guy just has too much fun with all 14 strings. (I'm still waiting for him to break into "Manic Depression" at a polka-silly pace.) In the meantime, his third and most eclectic full-length will give full satisfaction to all those air guit-steel players since Brown's string-pulling antics are given full play here -- particularly on "I Hung It Up," and the "Surf Medley." It's obvious that self-producing agrees with Brown and most of his originals on *Semi-Crazy*, such as "Gotta Get Up Every Morning," "Parole Board," and "Semi-Crazy" with scratch basso Red Simpson, are destined to become old country favorites by and by. Interesting, too, that the two stinkers on this plate were written by somebody else: The very odd, tinkly "Hong Kong Blues," and the too-croony "I Want To Hear It From You." But even those two kinda fit in Brown's surf-country cabaret. Tells you something, don't it? Those paperclip suits oughta stop leaning on Junior Brown. Just give him the money and shut up.

3 1/2 stars -- *Louisa C. Brinsmade*

WILLIE NELSON

Spirit (Island)

If songs were bluebonnets, spring in Austin would belong to Willie Nelson. He's been quoted as saying he's got hundreds of tunes lying around that haven't even been recorded, while others he resurrects because they were overlooked or worse yet, he no longer owns the publishing and wants to see a return on his handiwork. They flower everywhere. So, it wasn't long after *Spirit* took root in my stereo hardware, that I began pulling out old Willie Nelson albums to find where I'd heard these songs before. *Shotgun Willie?* *The Red Headed Stranger?* Nope. But "She Is Gone," "I'm Not Trying to Forget You Anymore," "Too Sick to Pray," surely I *know* these songs. They're classics, aren't they? Well, if not before, they are now, as is this album. It will nestle comfortably among the aforementioned platters; chronologically, it comes right after *Across the Borderline* on the must-have shelf. No doubt it's the tight, musical harmony of the album's quartet: sister Bobbie Nelson on piano, Johnny Gimble on the fiddle, Jody Payne on rhythm guitar, and Willie, playing *demon* leads on his acoustic. No guest stars, no other players, no drummer. This one sounds like it was cut in one or two days -- a couple of sessions -- like all those timeless jazz albums. And when Gimble's classical fiddle bleeds into Nelson's Spanish guitar on "Matador," or Nelson croons about love and God (almost exclusive subjects here), or the quartet locks as one into an instrumental like "Spirit of E9," even a category like jazz goes out the window. The only category this *Spirit* needs is "in-stock."

5 stars -- *Raoul Hernandez*

JIMMIE DALE GILMORE

Braver Newer World (Elektra)

The title does not lie. Gilmore is venturing into territory that only dreamers and outlaws dare to tread. But this is no soma holiday. Gilmore's painting big pictures of big places, mainly West Texas, his homeland as well as that of his heroes Roy Orbison and Buddy Holly, whose echelon he is sure to join if he's not already there. The sound is rough, muddy, and percolating. It desperately churns as if it were trying to remove itself from the bowels of the earth and run naked on the plains. If Guided by Voices were to take a road trip from Jacksboro to Iraan, this is what it would sound like. Perhaps producer T-Bone Burnett has found himself a new niche. Burnett's wife, Sam Phillips, gets into the act here, too. Her "Where Is Love Now?" is the most striking track on the album. Its slow, foreboding tempo conjures images of lazy windshield wipers stroking away the rain droplets on the edge of a greenish-gray spring storm on a lonely, West Texas highway. Gilmore has tapped into something here that transcends genre. Like the last song on the album, it's "Outside the Lines." This is the place from which the truly great art emanates. There's no turning back now.

4 stars -- *Joe Mitchell*

THREADGILL'S SUPPER SESSIONS: SECOND HELPINGS

(Watermelon)

Few things anywhere are as timeless as musicians singing for their supper. Even though everyone on this second Threadgill's album probably has no problem buying dinner, the effect is still the same: good friends sittin' around good food, makin' good music. There you go. Champ Hood, Marvin Dykhuis, David Heath, and Ron Erwin -- also known as the Threadgill's Troubadors -- along with special guests Rich Brotherton, Gary Primich, Sarah Elizabeth Campbell, Tish Hinojosa, Darcie Deaville, Toni Price, Mandy Mercier, and especially the late Walter Hyatt make *Second Helpings* a feast worth remembering. Price moans convincingly on Merle Haggard's "Tonight the Bottle Let Me Down," Mercier stops the show with a version of Janis Joplin's (a Threadgill's Troubador from way back) "Turtle Blues," and there's more than one tasty song about food on here. But the best part of the record, and tragically so since it was recorded on his birthday, is Hyatt's contribution. Mel Tillis' "Stick With Me Baby;" Big Bill Broonzy's "All By Myself;" and especially Jay D. Miller's Cajun love song "Diggy Liggy Lo" all resonate with the warm tenor and basic love of music that was taken away from us much too soon.

4 stars -- *Christopher Gray*

EVA YBARRA Y SU CONJUNTO

Romance Involvidable (Rounder)

If your first exposure to San Antonio's queen of the accordion came with 1994's strong *A Mi San Antonio*, as it did for so many of us in the non-Tejano world, then you'll be pleasantly surprised to hear that her follow-up for Rounder is even better. The jumpy, staccato style reminiscent of Flaco Jimenez is even more pronounced, and for some reason, the throaty vocals of Gloria Garcia Abadia, which didn't sit quite right with me last time, now seem to be the perfect complement to everything Ybarra tries. And Ybarra tries a lot, stretching outside of the usual rancheras, polkas, and *cumbias* of conjunto to try her hand at country (nice steel guitar), a combination bolero-tango, a *huapango* (which she dedicates to her Austin fans), and a dramatic corrido with a California-style banda on the tried-and-true theme of fleeing the cruelties of the border patrol. (Such stylistic daring is surely what attracted Austinite Cathy Ragland, host of KOOP radio's *World Music Archive*, to produce the disc.) In a genre that has the concept of borders inextricably woven into it, Ybarra, with *Romance Involvidable*, shows herself to be ahead of her peers in tastefully crossing over them.

4 stars -- *Lee Nichols*

WINDSOR FOR THE DERBY

(Trance Syndicate)

Windsor for the Derby (or Windsor for the Goddamn Derby, as Wesley Willis refers to them) have succumbed to the members-leaving-town syndrome in the year since this album was recorded. Although they did not have a lot of time to establish much of a live presence during their relatively short stint in Austin, this album bears evidence of some pretty serious woodshedding. The music seems to emerge from an appreciation of the German electronic instrumentalists of the Sixties and Seventies, and the band juxtaposes relentless repetition with omnipresent atmospheric noise lurking in the background to create a disconcerting, subtle notion of urgency. Beneath all the lilting melodies, a well-oiled machine keeps control in perfect time. Some may wind up frustrated at the lack of any apparent sense of purpose as the music drifts along, but it's just as easy to forget about that and create your own backdrop to complement these rather pleasant sounds.

3 stars -- *Greg Beets*

BUTTHOLE SURFERS

Electriclarryland (Capitol)

It was the best of albums, it was the worst of albums... Pretty much what every Butthole Surfers album has been over the past 13 years: Monumental jack-off in the hands of true pros -- or is that post-punk, post-rock, pre-alternative brilliance? You choose, because it's anyone's guess. One thing is clear, however: *Electriclarryland*, the Butthole Surfers' officially noted 13th album, is their best to date. And their *worst*. See, another innovation for the Austin trio. It's what *Mad* magazine always wanted to be; the rag you threw down in disgust (*hah, trash!*) and then snickered at and picked back up -- only to throw it down *again*. At its best, *...larryland* is "Pepper," a drum-looped nursery-rhyme that works Texas mythology to a level the state's visitors' bureau only dreams about. It's hard to resist, and because radio has swallowed it hook, line, etc., there's no reason to think new kiddie ditties like "Jingle of a Dogs Collar" and "TV Star" couldn't do just as well. At its worst though, *Electric...* is "Thermador," something best wiped off the studio console and not thought about. Same goes for "My Brother's Wife," and the French-in-three-easy-lessons muzak of "Let's Talk About Cars." Yet, what connects these studio time-killers with the more obviously commercial toss-offs -- as well as Leary's in-my-sleep Zep rave-ups like "Birds" and "Ulcer Breakout" -- is an overwhelming sense that the band just doesn't give a shit anymore. The lyrics could be from any cocktail napkin mess and the riffs could be from any late-night jam session. Assemble 'em and you get either "Pepper" or "Thermador" -- it seems almost arbitrary. What's that they say about throwing typewriters into a roomful of monkeys and waiting a few hundred years?

2 stars -- *Raoul Hernandez*

THE REVEREND HORTON HEAT

It's Martini Time (Interscope)

Pity the reverend: He's lookin' mean as ever and he can still play one hell of a guitar, but try as he might, he just can't recapture that barely contained insanity (some would say psychosis) of his first two records, *Smoke 'Em If You Got 'Em* and (especially!) *The Full-Custom Gospel Sounds of the Reverend Horton Heat*. Not that he isn't trying. There's every kind of song imaginable on *It's Martini Time*: barely controlled sleaze on the title track; homoerotic cowboy country lovin' on "Cowboy Love;" X-marks-the-spot bile-spewing on "Generation Why;" and big, bad, Keef-vintage riffs on "Slow." "Rock the Joint" and "Big Bad Bucket of Love" prove he hasn't lost his rockabilly chops, and he continues his surf flirtation with "Slingshot." Maybe he's just trying too hard. If he was just the Reverend, instead of the Reverend Doing

Surf, or the Reverend Doing Country, or the Reverend Doing Ministry ("Now, Right Now," a virtual carbon copy of 1994's "Yeah, Right"), maybe he could once again be the Master of the Psychobilly Freakout we all know and love.

2 1/2 stars -- *Christopher Gray*

PANTERA

The Great Southern Trendkill (Eastwest)

Heard Sammy's leaving Van Halen and it got me thinking. He may not be right for Pantera, but at this point neither is Phil Anselmo. That Anselmo can't sing isn't the issue. Nor is Anselmo's disregard for racial, social, and sexual etiquette. Pantera fans have come to expect nothing less. So then, why does Anselmo's rage sound so hollow here? And why do the outbursts about "nazi gangster Jews" and the like seem so premeditated? Is it all just a bait 'n' defend controversy ploy in the first place? Either way, it's tough to muster up the energy to care about the *Great Southern Trendkill* thanks to Anselmo's waste of so many fine riffs and grooves. Here's hoping Dimebag, Vinnie, and Rex decide they're better than this fluffy cartoon, better titled *Buzzkill*. Bring on Vantera.

1 1/2 stars -- *Andy Langer*

BROWN HORNET

The Brown Hornet Value-Pak

You gotta admire a relatively unknown local band that has the *cajones* to self-release a two-CD/one-cassette set. And Brown Hornet is definitely a band that knows the meaning of the word "value." This set is literally filled to the rim with aural snippets ranging in style from punk and funk to jazz and out-and-out white noise. The Hornet even manages to dupe Tony Campise into playing bass flute and piccolo on a song called "Penis Trouble." Overall, the effect is similar to that of watching TV while keeping your finger firmly pressed on the channel changer. As you're bombarded with seemingly insignificant, incongruent bits of information, a frenetic collage begins to emerge from the muck. This guerilla approach is similar to that of Negativland, only Brown Hornet uses music instead of mass media to terrorize the docile. Though a full serving of the *Value-Pak* is hardly easy listening, the music is tantalizing if just for the many anarchic possibilities it evokes.

3 1/2 stars -- *Greg Beets*

RONNIE DAWSON

Just Rockin' and Rollin' (Upstart)

After two reissues of rockabilly at its rawest, most booty-groovin' on Dallas' Crystal Clear label, authentic living legend Ronnie Dawson takes a step up to the Rounder subsidiary Upstart and... things are pretty much the same. Nothing new or fancy from Dawson here -- that just ain't his style. The tenor sax on the title track adds a nice finger-poppin' "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" feel to the record, and "Veronica" is definitely the best song written about someone named Veronica since Elvis Costello did it. Then there's "You Got a Long Way to Go," "Fish Out O'Water," "She's a Bad 'Un," and at least a half-dozen other rockabilly whompers. Live or photographed, I've never seen Ronnie Dawson do anything but smile and now I know why: He simply doesn't have anything to frown about. He's that good.

3 1/2 stars -- *Christopher Gray*

DON MCCALISTER

Love Gone Right (Biscuit Boy)

Don McCalister can have 'em swingin' and dancin' all night down at Broken Spoke, but it would be a sad misnomer to pigeonhole him as merely "One of those Western Swing guys." On this album, he certainly shines in that neck of the woods, but he also leaves himself plenty of room for playing around in other parts. There are Lovett-like country/jazz songs, country songs tinged with Tejano, and slow ballads. But for all the stylistic room, what McCalister really needs space for is his pen. His way with words has a naturalistic verve and grace normally reserved for more athletic endeavors. Here, he seems to be not trapped, but confining himself in subjects and themes below his level. McCalister knows the formulas and handles them with ease, knocking them out of the park like Jose Canseco facing a little league pitcher. Still, they haven't invented a league for him yet. It's up to McCalister to put forth the daring and imagination to forge it. In the meantime, this is an entertaining exhibition.

3 stars -- *Joe Mitchell*

BEDHEAD

Beheaded (Trance Syndicate)

Once again, Bedhead prescribes some superb medication to heighten the detachment of your dolorous stupor. For the most part, *Beheaded* is like a Nineties version of Pink Floyd's *Meddle* in the music-as-therapy department. To their ultimate credit, Bedhead's restraint in both structure and presentation is quite remarkable. They understand how sound fills a room better than 90 percent of their contemporaries. They also exploit the emotive power of the build to full capacity on songs like "The Rest of the Day" and "Withdraw." Kids could have sex or do drugs to this and convince themselves that their carnality has deeper, darker meanings. And just when you're starting to nod off, they turn around and slap you with the pop-minded "Felo de Se," which almost sounds (gulp) *happy*. Though this minor diversion is unlikely to change anyone's mind about the band, *Beheaded's* intimate lulls and peaks are quite effective when taken as directed.

3 stars -- *Greg Beets*

GINGBREAD MEN

Fresh Bread Baked Daily (Breadhouse)

Reviews are rarely fair to funk bands. If you're making a living off long, sweaty jams, and record 'em, it's not a record, it's masturbation. And if you try making a record full of four-minute songs, you've stripped away your mainstay -- the jam. So with plenty of fine tunes but no hooks, the Gingbread Men opt for the latter approach, hammering in dance phrases like "Give It Some Soul," "Absolutely!" or "Juice, we gonna put it to use," where the jams should've been. It's a notable effort, but unless you've seen this Austin band live, *Fresh Bread Baked Daily* makes it hard to believe "Jammin is the thing we do," "Life is a jam," and "I'm in it for the jam o' things." "Swing," "Juice," "Rhythm" and "Funk" are all overused in the Gingbread Men's vocab here, but are far more believable album concepts than invisible "jams." As such, what reeks the most here is the same material that's the biggest gas live. Damned if you do....

2 1/2 stars-- *Andy Langer*

BIGFOOT CHESTER

The Devil in Me (Sympathy for the Record Industry)

When the hellhounds are on your trail, you *run*. Fast. And when you can't run no more, turn and face 'em with your harp spewing fire like a flamethrower. Chase 'em off with a Bo Diddley beat to make the jungle

shriek. Douse them in Poison 13 and carve them into Tenderloin steaks. Let up for even a second, though, and you're lost to their gnashing jaws. Walter Daniels, Davy Jones and the rest of this local quintet start off making a valiant stand on *The Devil in Me*, but about halfway through the struggle, they flag a bit and start to flail. More harp ("Harpoon Man"), more Dylan ("Obviously 5 Believers"), more "Who Do You Love" ("Monkey Boy"), more harmonies by your rhythm section (Stephanie and Angele and "That Man is Bad News"). Just give me more, because when you don't we're all goners.

2 1/2 stars -- *Raoul Hernandez*

DEXTER FREEBISH

(Copper Moon Productions)

No, Dexter Freebish isn't the nerdy science club character from Archie comics. Nor does this band, formerly known as the Twigs, sound like the Archies (though they first got attention playing a place called "Pop's"). After an initial wariness, though, the Riverside gang would probably take to them just fine. Dexter plays shamelessly positive, pre-grunge pop, clean of tone both in the lyrical and guitar senses, with an occasional dollop of proggy dissonance thrown in to darken the mood a bit (and make Jughead think his CD player is slipping). There's nothing really new here, just a middle ground between Eighties radio new wave and Austin New Sincerity. Okay, to be more specific, they sound like *San Marcos* New Sincerity. Lest I'm making them sound too squeaky clean, though, let me add that Veronica would like them better than Betty would. (Bonus: Most copies of the CD come with special CD-ROM visuals.)

2 1/2 stars --*Ken Lieck*

THE KENNEDYS

Life Is Large (Green Linnet)

This is quintessential jangle pop generously dolloped with enough rock sneer to avoid 'wimpy' labels and sprinkled with enough country smarts to get the 'Americana' one. It's like Marshall Crenshaw circa 1983 or Tom Petty in a post-Prozac jolt. The name-dropping back cover boasts celeb project player after celeb project player. Seeing names like Charlie Sexton, Nils Lofgren, and Jimmy LaFave is enough to make an old cynic cringe. I want to loathe this album, but I can't get it out of that section of my brain where a tinny stereo plays songs when things get boring. Right now, the very Petty chorus of "Heart of Darkness" is bouncing around near my right ear while the Katrina & the Waves homage, "St. Marks Square," plays near my left. But the Kennedys aren't all lollipop ruckus. There's intelligence and plenty of wisdom to ponder. The lyrics are as positivistic as the instrumentation, but only because the speaker has dwelled all too long on the opposite end of the spectrum. It sounds like the K's are emerging from a long attitudinal trough and are vowing never to return. It's gets a little preachy at times, but overall, it's a compelling tale compellingly told.

3 stars -- *Joe Mitchell*