

THE BEATEN PATH

COUNTRY, FOLK, BLUES & OTHER AMERICANA

BY JONATHAN WRIGHT



Clearly head and shoulders above the rest of her peers, the universally treasured LUCINDA WILLIAMS has upheld the female standard for the *No Depression* set since that sub-genre's hazy inception. But what is far more interesting than the imminent praise that flows from the choir of the initiated is watching mainstream critics fall all over themselves heaping superlatives upon *World Without Tears* (Lost Highway), her seventh and most recent album. A 1998 Grammy recipient, Williams is no stranger to popular success, yet even in our post-*O Brother* world, she remains a bit of an elusive figure to the public at large – more people seem to have heard of her than have heard her music. A devoted fan, I had read a number of reviews lauding her latest as her “bravest, most emotionally wrenching record” (Allmusic.com) and “the record of a lifetime... a profoundly chilling, heartbreaking, important record” (*Vanity Fair*), but nonetheless I was slightly disappointed after those first few eager listens. Fortunately, I soon realized that the familiarity and inflated expectations borne of true fanaticism had caused me to take Ms. Williams' myriad gifts for granted. This is not a mistake that you have to repeat, for her latest is indeed yet another nearly flawless effort in a nearly flawless body of work.

Musically, *World Without Tears* picks up where her prior work left off: the upbeat blues-rock of 1998's *Car Wheels On A Gravel Road* as well as the slow, sultry dirges of 2001's *Essence*. Leadoff track “Fruits of My Labor,” the gentle, poetic “Minneapolis,” and the Wurlitzer-fueled “American Dream” might all have been *Essence* tunes had they been funneled through the existential guitar wizardry and co-production of that album's Charlie Sexton. As remarkable as Sexton's contributions to *Essence* were, Williams wisely shifts course, continuing an inclination to approach each new outing from a fresh angle. On *World Without Tears*, she foregoes her last two



albums' extended cast of session players to rock out with her road band, lending even the ballads a more ragged feel. “Those Three Days” is the catchiest tune, the jive-talkin' “Sweet Side” boasts the best lyrical phrasing, and “Atonement” smothers your ass with Crazy Horse-style distortion, while “Real Live Bleeding Fingers and Broken Guitar Strings,” Lucinda's blistering ode to Paul Westerberg, is another highlight. As always, her lyrics are relationship-focused, emotionally weighty, and well served by one of the most powerful vocal deliveries in all of music. Unlike many, I couldn't say that this is Williams' best record, but it's certainly as good as anything else she's done, the accolades being heaped upon it by the mainstream press being so long overdue.

GILLIAN WELCH, another titan of modern American roots music, achieved modest fame with the anomalous popularity of the aforementioned *O Brother*, yet hers is hardly a household name. *Soul Journey* (Acony), Welch's self-proclaimed “sunniest record” yet, is certainly worthy of an audience the size of Norah Jones', for whom Welch and her soul partner David Rawlings open several dates this summer. Her fourth album, and second on her own Acony Records, *Soul Journey* is, like its predecessor *Time* (*The Revelator*), produced by Rawlings, who, while deliberately keeping a low profile, is clearly the integral grounding factor in Gillian's music, playing a magical hand in each stage of her creative process. Recorded during a four-day jam session (featuring Son Volt bassist Jim Boquist), *Soul Journey* is a far more straightforward collection of songs than was *The Revelator*, that snaking, enigmatic puzzle wrapped in deceptively simple clothing. Two traditionalists, “Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor” and “I Had A Real Good Mother and Father,” along with the sweet “One Little Song,” mark what are, surprisingly, Welch's first completely unaccompanied performances. On the other



hand, “Wayside/Back In Time” is one of her liveliest songs to date, and about half of the album features a lineup fuller than usual of bass, drums, fiddle, and organ. Each song is a finely cut jewel, from the mournful but righteous (“No One Knows My Name”) to the loping (“Lowlands”), the memorable (“One Monkey”), and the lovely (“Look At Miss Ohio,” which contains some subtle yet stunning vocal nuance). The songs of Gillian Welch continue to astound, with intimacy and immediacy as their binding factors, both cause and effect and reason for adoration.

Leading off the Bloodshot label's latest round of releases is JON LANGFORD & HIS SADIES' *Mayors of the Moon*, twelve new collaborative compositions from the Welsh grandfather of “insurgent country” and one of the most versatile bands around. Langford's presence generally ensures quality, and *Mayors* is no exception to that rule. While his Waco Brothers provide a rollicking soundtrack to a rowdy night of bar hopping, his Sadies offer the more lucid backdrop to the morning after. If The Pogues had made a country record, it might have sounded like this. Meanwhile, the label's newest act, THE LEGENDARY SHACK SHAKERS, explode out of the gate with the originally self-released debut, *Cockadoodledon't*, an unfortunately named half-hour of no-holds-barred “insurgent rockabilly.” Lining up behind “Nashville's Best Frontman” Col. J.D. Wilkes, a Jerry Lee/ Iggy Pop/ Lux Interior hybrid, the Shakers coalesced out of a handful of like-minded bands in 2001 and were heralded for their raw, incendiary live performances, reminiscent of Jason and The Scorchers in their ragged prime. While they could hardly be expected to duplicate the sweaty, swampy primal scream of their fervent live show on disc, *Cockadoodledon't* is an entertaining, raucous trip nonetheless.

Rapidly becoming Bloodshot's flagship act, alt-

country diva NEKO CASE continues to build a rich, resounding catalog with her third solo full-length, *Blacklisted*. Recording in the hot, dry air of Tucson, Arizona, Case borrows one of Jon Langford's Sadies and pulls Calexico's Burns/Convertino team, Giant Sand's Howe Gelb, and Bloodshot's own Kelly Hogan into her world of torch/twang melancholy, providing a shuffling backdrop for her own jaw-droppingly elegant, silky smooth vocals. What emerges is an urban, country-tinged set of songs that downplays the classic C&W of her early work in favor of the dark, haunting sparseness first uncovered on 2001's *Canadian Amp* EP. Case's evocative vocals are two parts Patsy Cline, one part Billie Holiday, linking the heartbreaking high lonesome of the former with the icy sensuality of the latter. No mere pretty voice, eleven of the thirteen songs were written or co-written by Case; she also co-produces and plays a variety of instruments on her most memorable work yet.

Ms. Case also contributes to *The Slaughter Rule*, a Bloodshot soundtrack of skeletal guitar-based soundscapes interspersed with songs from the likes of Freakwater, Ryan Adams, and The Flatlanders. Americana mainstay JAY FARRAR provides the score, his output somewhere between competent, admirable, and generally predictable, firmly lodged amidst Clapton's *Rush* and the Ry Cooder discography. Coming on the heels of former mate Jeff Tweedy's score for the 2002 film *Chelsea Walls*, it's difficult not to point out that Farrar looks like a competitive rival playing catch-up games, but that perception is largely unfair. Regardless, what makes this collection worth its weight are its standards: a reformed Blood Oranges' take on the Stanley Brothers' classic “Gathering Flowers For the Master's Bouquet,” Freakwater's lovely Louvins salute “When I Stop Dreaming,” Vic Chesnutt's typically morose version of the Stanleys' “Rank Stranger,” and Uncle Tupelo's rare 1993 nugget “Blue Eyes,” a gem of a Gram Parsons number from his International Submarine Band days. Farrar's every-other-song score wisely cedes the finale to The Pernice Brothers, who transform the traditional “Stars In My Crown” into a stunning, ethereal, shoegazer-Americana hybrid, losing none of the gospel original's uplifting spirit.

In addition, the diligent Farrar recently wrapped up work on *Terrorir Blues*, the lukewarm follow-up to *Sebastopol* issued on his new imprint Act/Resist. As if still scoring film, Farrar mixes a handful of throwaway instrumental snippets throughout, but longtime fans of The Voice have plenty to dig into as well. A mostly acoustic affair, the album should in theory please those traditionalists who were put off by the elaborate instrumentation of his debut solo platter, but Farrar's ear for melody seems to have been shortchanged in the process for a more oblique, avant-garde approach to the heartland of which he sings. Despite this vaguely experimental disposition, *Terrorir Blues* is neither as artistically

daring as *Sebastopol* nor as fulfilling; in this sense it is similar to Son Volt's third and final record, which also found Farrar sounding the same but going nowhere. The Voice may be as pleasurable a trip as ever (diehards will satisfy their jones), but the generally weak song cycle leaves one waxing more fondly upon Farrar's past catalog. Again, his experimental desires leave one wondering if he is following Tweedy's lead, but minus the Wilco leader's colossal pop sensibilities, this fragmented musical journal suggests that Farrar can't quite do the *Foxtrot*.

Speaking of Wilco, 2003 has already brought forth two releases from the camp's slew of side projects: LOOSE FUR, Jeff Tweedy and Glenn Kotche's collaboration with indie rock uber Mensch Jim O'Rourke, and the band's alliance with Young Fresh Fellow Scott McCaughey's pop collective THE MINUS 5. The Minus 5's cheekily titled *Down With Wilco* (Yep Roc) is a lush, five-star affair in which McCaughey's over-the-top vocal arrangements and out-of-control Brian Wilsonisms are tempered by the sane, calculated experimentation of post-*Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* Wilco. The songs are mostly McCaughey's with some Tweedy co-writes, and, as usual, Peter Buck (R.E.M.), Ken Stringfellow (Posies), and Sean O'Hagan (High Llamas) are not far away, but the entire Minus 5 musical environment has been hijacked by the members of Wilco for the benefit of all. For fans of *Summer Teeth*'s urbane pop, *Down With Wilco* is highly recommended. More experimental, less brilliant, but quite good nonetheless is *Loose Fur* (Drag City). For those familiar with both Wilco and O'Rourke's contemporary pop masterpieces (*Eureka*, *Insignificance*), Loose Fur sounds exactly as you would expect. Tweedy and O'Rourke swap their mutually unmistakable vocal melodies in between extended instrumental jams, while Kotche always finds just what he needs to lay down his shambolic percussion. The album's only real fault is its tendency to meander, hardly a cardinal sin when the musicians are so highly creative and living in the shadow of a band who gains significance daily.

Long-time fans of THE JAYHAWKS who felt that the band had lost its way with the pop direction explored on 2000's *Smile* should enjoy the stripped-down *Rainy Day Music* (American). I happen to think *Smile* is wonderful, and I foresee Gary Louris & Co. eventually reincorporating that sound someday, but for now *Rainy Day* is a welcome throwback to the glory days of *Hollywood Town Hall* and *Tomorrow the Green Grass*. No, Mark Olson hasn't rejoined the band, but the back-to-basics approach finds The Jayhawks in a very comfortable position, in a sense mirroring their own niche in the alt-country hierarchy as the “comfortable old shoe.” Occasionally sounding like Simon & Garfunkel backed by a country band, the band's delightful harmonies salvage even the handful of mediocre songs that could have been left off this fourteen-song set. In addition, the album's first pressing



includes “More Rain,” a bonus disc of six demos and acoustic takes which are unessential but will please fans. Even better is Rykodisc's long-awaited reissue of the Minneapolis band's out-of-print 1989 outing, *Blue Earth*. Their second record, it was the first to fully realize The Jayhawks' harmony-laden extension of Gram Parsons' Cosmic American oeuvre and includes several numbers (“Two Angels,” “Ain't No End”) that are staples of their live set to this day. Ryko tacks three previously unreleased tracks onto the end of the set, ensuring its indispensability to collectors. To paraphrase the liner notes, one could make a rational argument that the ground for modern Americana was broken right here.

Next we come to JES SE MALIN, whose *The Fine Art of Self-Destruction* (Artemis) was produced by his good friend, the fiercely loved and equally despised Ryan Adams. Malin is no newcomer to the scenes of alienation and raging self-pity of which he sings on his debut solo platter, having previously lashed out in Eighties hardcore act Heart Attack and dolled it up with Nineties glam rockers D Generation, but he



appears to be most comfortable in his new set of singer-songwriter shoes, at least as comfortable as one can be with a repertoire dominated by insecurity, lamentation, anxiety, pain, sadness, heartbreak, and loneliness. Somehow shrugging off this swirling vortex of troubles even while acknowledging its inseparability from his own identity, Malin's song cycle, a virtual psychiatric session for the songwriter, never misplaces its wry sense of humor and unbreakable New York spirit. A buoyant yet subtle optimism accompanies even the most hopeless of themes, all placed into proper perspective as the aches of growing up and older become more apparent. The musicianship and production falls squarely into the Ryan Adams camp of modern classic rock, but where Adams arrived at the sound through a prism of country influences, Malin's pedigree is far more informed by Gene Simmons and Johnny Thunders. His melodies are catchy and affecting, his contemplation sincere and universal, and *The Fine Art of Self-Destruction* a rewarding listen and splendid debut.

Sometime after the success of 1992's *It's A Shame About Ray* and the next year's follow-up, *Come On Feel The Lemonheads*, chief Lemonhead EVAN DANDO was inexplicably transformed from A-list slacker hot shot to Alternative Nation goat virtually overnight. Long before 1996's lackluster *Car Button Cloth*, the band had effectively lost its audience, due mostly to Dando's drug-fueled erratic behavior. And while such antics certainly helped him dig his own grave, the nasty vitriol spewed his direction throughout most of the last decade seems in retrospect undeserved and childish. *Baby I'm Bored* (Bar-None) is Dando's first full-length album proper, and marks his return to the public eye after more than five years of seclusion, following his initial solo gigs of 2001 and that year's United Kingdom-only *Live at the Brattle Theatre/Griffith Sunset* (EMI). Considering the man's well-known affinity for Gram and the live album's inclusion of songs by Hank, Townes, The Louvins, and John Prine, many suspected that Dando would attempt to reinvent himself as some sort of alt-country troubadour. Instead, *Baby I'm Bored* showcases a now sober and unassuming Evan Dando essentially picking up the acoustic shards of his former band and simply being himself, albeit with a maturity previously unexposed. Aided by ex-Codeine drummer/session man Chris Brokaw and the members of Giant Sand, Dando is at ease in this twelve-song setting, his warm, leisurely vocals working the room with big pop hooks and reminding his listeners why we liked him in the first place. Tunes like "Waking Up," "It Looks Like You," and "In the Grass All Wine Colored" are cute, catchy, and casual; any one of them could fold nicely into *It's A Shame About Ray*. Dando's not about to ask forgiveness for whatever he may have done wrong in the Nineties, and this album is unlikely to convince the card-carrying Evan Dando hater, but for those willing to forget the man's recent disappointments, it's well worth

your time.

Before alt-country there was "cow punk," the musical lexicon's then-choice expression to depict those few who eschewed the day's synth-slickened Top 40 drivel to fuse trad-country's ragged authenticity with the frenetic energy of punk rock. While such bands as Rank and File and The Blasters achieved varying degrees of success in the Eighties, none stood as tall as Nashville's Jason and The Scorchers, who, led by fire-breathing frontman JASON RINGENBERG, burst onto the scene with 1983's absolutely blistering *Fervor* EP. After several more fine efforts, The Scorchers fell prey to the hair-metal zeitgeist of the times and imploded in 1990. Jason then turned back to his roots for several solo efforts, only to reform The Scorchers in 1995 for a well-received second run which continues sporadically to this day. *All Over Creation* (Yep Roc), a hyper-eclectic series of inspired collaborations between Ringenberg and kindred spirits Todd Snider, Steve Earle, Lambchop, and others, is, as in The Scorchers' heyday, a tidy negotiation between Ringenberg's honky tonk soul and rock'n'roll heart, as he nonchalantly swaps one for the other throughout, unmistakably hell-bent on having a good ol' time. High-spirited covers of Loretta Lynn, George Jones, and The Gun Club mingle with Ringenberg co-writes, including the rocker "One Less Heartache" (with Britain's Wildhearts), the oddball potency of opener "Honky Tonk Maniac From Mars" (with Hamell On Trial), and an update on the Scorchers classic "Bible and A Gun" (with Earle). Collaboration albums are often a mixed bag, and Ringenberg, who relishes his current handle as "The Rockinest Folk Singer That Ever Lived," deserves credit for successfully melding the disparate artistic visions of his partners to his own.

Meanwhile, SOLOMON BURKE, the under-appreciated King of Rock and Soul, submits a comparable set of yet higher-profile collaborations with *Don't Give Up On Me*, his Fat Possum debut and most acclaimed album in decades. Someday an entire book will be devoted to the eccentric Burke, a preacher since the age of seven, Doctor of Mortuary Science, part-time concession vendor, and patriarch to twenty-one children and sixty-three grandchildren; his enthralling biography is not easily sketched out in a few words. Although Burke scored no Top 20 hits during his Sixties heyday, he was the charismatic soul giant upon which Atlantic Records' empire was constructed and is only now receiving his proper dues, with his 2001 induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Grammy win for this album. *Don't Give Up On Me* collects eleven previously unreleased compositions from A-listers Elvis Costello, Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Tom Waits, and Brian Wilson and feeds them to Solomon's rich baritone, undiminished by age, linking them seamlessly. Recorded live in the studio in just four days, the album is marvelously produced by Joe Henry, its tight, spare arrangements defined by his

appropriate emphasis on the King's throat. A small ensemble anchored by Burke's church organist paints the gospel, soul, and blues canvases upon which his nuanced vocal phrasing and Herculean vigor impart their great depths of emotional heft. Dan Penn's title track plays like an unearthed Sixties deep soul classic, "Diamond In Your Mind" is vintage Waits-ian storytelling, while the bluesy "Step Child" is clearly cut from the same cloth as Dylan's last two. Other highlights include Morrison's two numbers, Henry's own "Flesh and Blood," and the Brill Building spiritual "None of Us Are Free," featuring the Blind Boys of Alabama gently crooning in the background. Henry, whose intention was to extend Burke's legacy rather than merely append another footnote to it, succeeds brilliantly, playing Rick Rubin to Burke's Johnny Cash in a similar neoteric revitalization of a classic artist, quite possibly the greatest soul singer of all time.

With *Cobblestone Runway* (Nettwerk America), his sixth and most satisfying full-length, RON SEXSMITH has vaulted beyond his perennial stand nobly poised on the cusp of greatness. With each successive album, the Canadian-born Sexsmith has grown more comfortable in his own skin, even as his lyrical ruminations continue to plow abundant fields of self-doubt, uncertainty, and romantic fatalism. On *Runway* the sensitive poet sifts through his confusion and emerges head up, searching for redemption and reassurance in a veritable sea of hopefulness and imparting to his audience any jewels of wisdom he picks up along the way. One can only imagine how starkly different this world would be if its leaders afforded an iota of credence to Sexsmith's Utopian worldview and wide-eyed optimism. Alas, while such sentiment is not fashionable in Bush II's newest World Order, these are the days when we need Ron's pleasant if shaky baritone gushing "God Loves Everyone" more than ever. (Amazingly, this song, whose innocuous theme is self-evident, garnered controversy upon its release for its radical notion that God really does love everyone and not just heterosexual Christians!). In a characteristically sharp turn, Sexsmith foregoes the tried and true roots-rock sound of 2001's Steve Earle-produced *Blue Boy* (another masterpiece, by the way) in favor of the sparse, contemporary approach of Swedish producer Martin Terefe, who, to his credit, never allows his modest electro-soundscapes to overshadow Sexsmith's dazzling melodies. Even as soulful choirs and sophisticated string arrangements rendezvous with disco-beat funk and syncopated electronica, these songs could still be played on an acoustic guitar. To top it off, Coldplay's Chris Martin pops up for a bonus duet remix of "Gold In Them Hills" that is to die for. Few songwriters produce work that is so pliable and translatable across genres - Dylan comes to mind - and *Cobblestone Runway* may well mark Sexsmith's entrance into such hallowed territory.

BOBBY BARE JR. takes time off from the

raucous southern rock of his band Bare Jr. and tries his hand at the singer-songwriter trade with much success on *Young Criminals' Starvation League* (Bloodshot). His father a successful country artist, Bare Jr. came of age in Seventies Nashville, rubbing elbows with George, Willie, and Kristofferson while just a kid; he was even nominated for a Grammy at the age of five for a duet with dad on a Shel Silverstein number. Bare's first solo jaunt is much more than a return to the country roots of his youth, however. While most of its songs exhibit at least some country influence, there are no Bakersfield stomps or galloping honky tonk numbers to be found; Bare is as much rock and pop as country. *Starvation League* leads off with its finest tune, "I'll Be Around," a potential classic which opens as a simple acoustic number before recruiting female harmonies, keyboard swells, virtuosic mariachi horns, and "ba-ba-ba-ba-ba" refrains to inject the song with a sophisticated, jazzy air that would color Archer Prewitt green with envy. Heavily influenced by Silverstein's ironic storytelling, Bare spins off-the-wall, character-driven yarns on "Flat Chested Girl From Maynardville" and "The Monk At the Disco," while covering the man himself on the album's closer, "Painting Her Fingernails." "Dig Down," a tongue-in-cheek open letter to the rock gods, is a highlight, as well as the marvelous rockabilly transformation of The Smiths' "What Differences Does it Make?" Recorded with members of Lambchop, *Starvation League* certifies Bare's songwriting mettle, capturing both heartbreak and humor within melodies you'll hum all day.

Similarly, if there are reasons to dislike Austin's hometown heroes THE GOURDS (and that is a dubious supposition), the humability quotient of their song catalog is not a viable one. A single listen to "My Name Is Jorge," the infectious opening track from the eccentric band's fifth album, *Cow Fish Fowl or Pig* (Sugar Hill), and the song will still be bouncing around your head days later. Celebratory and cerebral, *Cow Fish Fowl or Pig* seems the effortless product of a band who stand enormously comfortable in their own shoes, yet are sharp enough to know the dangers of standing still. It is good times and goofiness distilled to a respectable science, an inimitable stew of off-kilter Americana concoctions, Hank and JB getting slobbered with Doug Sahn. Court jesters in the House of Big Pink, The Gourds boast three exceptional songwriters in their ranks, one of whom moonlights as KEV RUSSELL'S JUNKER, whose *Buttermilk & Rifles* (Munich) is damn near the equal of any of his primary band's highly acclaimed records. Featuring many a Gourd on this or that, the Junker also boasts of top-notch lyrics and tunes so catchy you won't be able to find a fitting metaphor.

Former V-Roys frontman SCOTT MILLER and his revolving dynamo of backing musicians THE COMMONWEALTH are back on the Knoxville scene, dishing out a second helping of



soulful southern charm and hospitality. *Upside Downside* (Sugar Hill), Miller's follow-up to 2001's *Thus Always to Tyrants*, is every bit the equal of its thoughtful predecessor and is framed by the same inescapable specters of the South which animate the like-minded work of counterparts The Drive-By Truckers and Slobberbone. Miller doses his electrified barroom gala with a humble pinch of singer-songwriter sentimentality and a healthy dash of American history, flushing it all through the worldview of the common working man while constantly minding the bottom line of good times. You can practically feel the grin on Miller's face as he stomps cocksurely through the opener "It Didn't Take Too Long," a "Roll Over Beethoven" for the southern rock-minded, then bounces right into the rocker "Raised By the Graves." "Chill, Relax, Now" finds Miller and the 'Wealth loosely refiguring the classic Stax grooves of Booker T & The MGs, while "Angels Dwell" showcases the graceful backing vocals of Patty Griffin. Fine stuff.

Miller, along with the previously cited Drive-By Truckers and Slobberbone, stands at the forefront of a new Southern rock paradigm that essentially filters the Skynyrd blueprint through post-Replacements style garage rock. A slew of variations on this archetype abound, with widely disparate results: Glossary's satisfying, whiskey-soaked rural rock, the conventional power-pop twang of The Indicators, the Memphis Radio Kings' tasteful, feel-good shuffles, and the novelty cow punk of The Barnyard Playboys. The pick of this crop is GLOSARY, a six-piece from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, who sound much like the second coming of Whiskeytown on their third record, *How We Handle Our Midnights* (Undertow). Fueled by youthful exuberance



and roadhouse guitars soaked in pedal steel, banjo, and organ, Glossary rocks like they're playing the last bar left in the whole world; female vocal harmonies amplify the Whiskeytown analogy, although that band's ubiquitous fiddle has no direct translation here. Two hundred plus miles to the southeast, THE INDICA TORS plow similar territory, emphasizing the poppier side of twang-rock on their second record, *Kill the Messenger* (Lynn Point). The Atlanta quartet comes off as a lesser Old 97s, capable enough for local distinction perhaps but ultimately sunk by bland lyrics, predictable rhymes, and mediocre songs. Seattle's MEMPHIS RADIO KINGS fare only slightly better on *No Band In the Happy Place* (Hot Stack), introducing the jangly Athens of Eighties R.E.M. and Guadalcanal Diary into the Southern rock formula but falling prey to similar criticism. The trio displays instrumental prowess but winds up in the middle of the road with good vocals that should be great, melodies that should be catchier, and a hard-to-overcome pervasion of the average. And then there are THE BARNYARD PLAYBOYS. I don't have a complaint with their music itself – though an overly familiar trad-country/punk rock hybrid, it's played with energy and heart – but I can not take seriously an album called *Corn Dog Love* (Rubric), nor songs called "Turd In the Mail" or "Mama's Big Behind." Seriously, the title track is a love song to corn dogs.

THE BE GOOD TANYAS, a trio of young ladies from Vancouver, have come a long way from their beginnings busking for change outside a 1999 Lilith Fair stop. After months of coffee shop gigs, a national tour commenced, followed by the recording of their debut *Blue Horse* (Nettwerk), which garnered much acclaim upon its 2001 release. Where that album leaned toward the sunny side of traditional Appalachia, its successor, the self-produced sophomore release *Chinatown* (Nettwerk), finds the traditionalist lineup of Parton, Ford, and Klein slowing their sleepy pace even more and turning to the dark timelessness of death, drugs, and depression for inspiration. Delicate acoustic fingerpicking and superb three-part vocal harmonies are the Tanyas' tour de force, glossing over the doldrums of their lyrical preoccupations. Seven originals blend seamlessly with like-minded covers (Townes Van Zandt's "Waiting Around to Die," Peter Rowan's "Midnight Moonlight," the standards "House of the Rising Sun" and "In My Time of Dying") to carve fragile minimalist beauties out of the pastoral landscape. Less hard-hitting is *Pure Beauty* (Carrot Top), the new five-song EP from THE NAYSAYER. A vehicle for the offbeat songcraft of Anna Padgett, The Naysayer is more cheeky than serious; while its penchant for a gentler minimalism is musically analogous to the Tanyas, its black humor and dick jokes (see the title track) drive it toward light-hearted novelty. Opting for a more countrified approach than on earlier records, Padgett adopts the pose of an alt-country Liz Phair, while Cynthia Nelson

(Retsin) and several members of Ida back her up. Returning to the domain of faux-Appalachia preservation, Freakwater's CATHERINE IRWIN recently put out her first solo platter, the aptly-titled *Cut Yourself A Switch*, on Chicago's venerable Thrill Jockey label. Foregoing her usual harmonizing with Janet Bean for an even more stripped-down sound, Irwin's high lonesome vocals and guitar-picking anchor each song, often joined only by the bass of Freakwater's Dave Gay. Occasionally an organ fill or fiddle run may arise, always in lock and step with the record's low-key sensibilities. Like The Be Good Tanyas and her Appalachian forebears, Irwin's worldview has been greatly shaped by death and dying and is a ubiquitous component to her music. Eight originals sit alongside reworked tunes by Elvis, The Carter Family, and the recently departed Johnny Paycheck, Irwin's pointed wit and incisive humor nestled snugly in the midst of tragedy.

Real life tragedy drives *Here Comes the New Folk Underground* (Lost Highway), the first solo platter from DAVID BAERWALD in ten years. Half of the short-lived duo David + David, whose sole 1986 release *Boomtown* sold a million copies, he recorded three solo records in the early Nineties and worked with Sheryl Crow on her 1993 breakthrough *Tuesday Night Music Club*. Since then he has concentrated on film projects and session work, earning a Golden Globe nomination for *Moulin Rouge*, and working with everyone from Waylon Jennings to Michael Jackson. *Here Comes the New Folk Underground* stewes in Baerwald's trademark brew of modern folk, blue-eyed soul, roots rock, and jazz-tinged pop, demonstrating that the man has lost none of his cerebral wit or wry perspective. A catharsis of sorts, these ten songs grew from the soul-searching that followed the tragic death of a close friend's young son, which saw Baerwald holing up in the studio with his usual gang of Austin and Los Angeles musicians for what was dubbed a "six-week wake." Those bittersweet sessions yielded over thirty songs, which were distributed over the Internet before *Lost Highway* expressed interest in issuing a pared-down version. A powerful human spirit flows through this song cycle, matching the splendid rapport conjured by its A-list players and countering Baerwald's ironic fatalism with a world-weary hopefulness. This dichotomy seems to account for the utter sweetness with which he can sing about a car wreck on "The Crash" ("Slip slide we were taking a ride") and the rueful existentialist bent of "Why" ("Watching goodness die," "Don't ask me why cuz I don't know"). "Love #29" is another highlight, its soulful chorus mimicking vintage Prince balladry. *Here Comes the New Folk Underground* is a complex and contradictory study in coping with tragedy, at various times uplifting and sorrowful, unfailingly emotional and poignant.

Likewise borne of dreadful circumstance, *Freedom's Child* (Compadre) is the first solo

outing in fifteen years from outlaw BILL Y JOE SHAVER and owes its existence to his son Eddy's fatal 2000 heroin overdose, which brought an end to their ten-year partnership as Shaver, the band. Earlier that same year, Billy Joe lost his wife and mother a month apart to cancer, while in 2001 he suffered a heart attack on stage. It hasn't been an easy ride for Texas' greatest living songwriter, but the hard-luck Shaver endures as the same durable, spirited redneck shaman who penned nine of the ten cuts on buddy Waylon's seminal *Honky Tonk Heroes*, the Holy Grail of the Seventies outlaw movement. Seeking redemption through art and comfort in his own songs, Shaver professes that "writing's the cheapest psychiatrist there is" and pours out his soul on these fifteen numbers, a surprisingly upbeat assemblage of themes of love, loss, grief, and family. No longer riding the crest of his son's scorching guitar licks, the sixty-three year-old Shaver has assembled a new band, led by John's son Jamie Hartford, and stepped back for a more subdued, traditional album than other recent efforts. "Hold On to Yours (And I'll Hold On to Mine)" and "Day By Day" find Shaver wringing wisdom from experience, his gruff vocals reflecting Zen-like on relationships past and present, while showcasing his sense of humor on "Deja Blues" and "Wild Cow Gravy" (a response to the classic "Mountain Dew"). He adopts Johnny Cash's vow of solidarity with the poor and oppressed on "That's Why the Man In Black Sings the Blues" and speaks in double entendre on the barroom rocker "That's What She Said Last Night." With the promise of redemption fulfilled, Billy Joe Shaver remains the living, breathing embodiment of country music, the much-suffered Christ-like figure of honky tonk.

Like Shaver, RONNY ELLIOTT is a grizzled veteran of hardship and struggle, an iconoclastic singer-songwriter who toes no traditionalist line of the country, blues, and rock'n'roll, which inform his work. In the Sixties and Seventies, Elliott played with a number of bands, including Your Local Bear (opened for Hendrix in 1967), Duckbutter (backed up Chuck Berry and Gene Vincent), and The Outlaws (nationally known southern rock band). In 1995, he formed The Nationals, who have backed him on all five of his solo discs, including the latest, *Magneto* (Blue Heart). Elliott's off-kilter brand of Americana serves mostly as a sounding board for his wildly imaginative lyrics and knack for storytelling, his verbose imagery at times recalling the literary qualities of Terry Allen's 1979 masterpiece *Lubbock* (*On Everything*). Like Allen, Elliott comes off as a rural intellectual, widely informed about the world at large and as likely to expound at length on Degas as Hank, Parisian bohemia as New Orleans voodoo, Hemingway as Luke the Drifter. His stories are spoken/sung in a Johnny-Cash-on-acid manner which, though charming, begins to show its limitations long before the final song wraps up. Despite Elliott's narrow vocal range, *Magneto* is a solid piece of work by a quirky Tampa native who sounds more like a

Texan than most.

Reckless Burning (Burn Burn Burn/Barsuk) is the impressive introduction to JESSE SYKES & THE SWEET HEREAFTER. Originally launched in early 2002, *Burning* received a well-deserved torrent of accolades, resulting in this wider release in conjunction with Barsuk Records. Effortlessly dissolving somewhere between alt-country and the slo-core melancholy of Low and Cat Power, Sykes & the Hereafter lay down nine classy tunes marked by a smoldering, emotional brooding and the sense of instant familiarity that occasionally accompanies a very strong song cycle. Phil Wandscher, the ex-Whiskeytown axe-slinger who co-wrote much of that band's genre-defining *Strangers' Almanac*, contributes on guitar, piano, and organ, masterfully spinning a spider web of musical elegance awash in a hazy, dreamlike reverb. Accompanied by accents of mellotron, banjo, and lap steel, and with a small ensemble rounded out by ex-Walkabouts violinist Anne Marie Ruljancich, Neko Case sideman Bill Herzog on stand-up bass, and percussionist Kevin Warner, the album's focus falls squarely on Jesse Sykes' warm, sepulchral alto. Obvious comparisons to The Cowboy Junkies aside, Sykes displays an extraordinary presence and proves herself an exceptional songwriter whose future work will be anxiously awaited.

Likewise, RAMSAY MIDWOOD's debut, *Shootout At the OK Chinese Restaurant* (Vanguard), was only recently issued in the States, several years after its European release. As Midwood's performance squarely places him in a rich line of consummate American individualists, his greater appeal to European audiences seems all the more ironic. Steeped in folk music and the blues from a very young age, the idiosyncratic Midwood skipped across this fine land from D.C. to Chicago to Los Angeles to Austin, acting in stage plays (*The Grapes of Wrath*, of course) and honing his songs in local coffeehouses, before laying down *Shootout*. Midwood nods to Dylan and The Band, Woody and Mississippi John; he hangs with Randy Newman in hipper days and digs a Redbone jive, all the while spinning tall tales like Tom Waits' second cousin. His sparse, dusty shuffles abound with nuanced character and indefatigable vigor, a beautifully skewed portrait of blue-collar tradition. The comparably low-key JOSH RITTER shares with Midwood a larger following overseas than in his native land, though that could change if his "Next Big Thing" status loses the "Next." Straight outta Moscow, Idaho, Mr. Ritter submits a worthy follow-up to the critical acclaim of his self-released debut in *Golden Age of Radio* (Signature). The shy guy with the guitar, he speaks simply, wears his heart on his sleeve, and worships at the altars of Cohen and Drake, with some Springsteen thrown in for good measure. Having toured with Dylan, Joan Baez, and played the Newport Folk Festival, the twenty-five year-old Ritter seems assured of a place on the circuit for years to come.

