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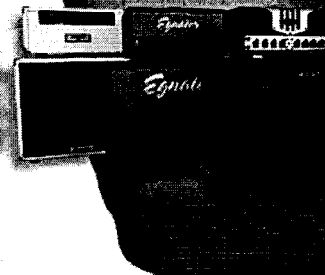
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like a darker, country-tinged Sarah McLachlan.

For the ballad "The World's On Fire" and simmering title track Kelman borrowed Corby Schaub from Ryan Bingham's band, and Ribot is back on "Midnight Plane" for some tasteful slide.

Smith may be the next Americana star. In fact, she may not have to wait for a second CD to prove it. — **DF**



The John Henrys
White Linen
91b Records

The John Henrys would be the last to deny the influence of Tom Petty's music on their work—the clipped vocal phrasing of the opener, "Little One," (a la Petty's "The Waiting") and the three-pronged guitar attack that propels it are undeniable giveaways. But for the most part, the Henrys stay on the right side of the line between influence and imitation while also making a case for crediting Petty as a founding father of the Americana genre.

The guitar-dependant, emotionally upbeat feel of the John Henrys' music, where vocals and guitar are given equal weight in the mix, puts them in the Blue Rodeo side of the genre. While they don't get into "gritty" or "dark," *White Linen* is not all blue skies and driving with the top down. "Good Man" highlights Steve Tatones' steel guitar, while "Dawson City" and the title cut which mix elements of Neil Young and the Band with *New Morning*-era Bob Dylan, give the album the weight and balance that make it work. — **RA**



Big Head Todd and the Monsters
Rocksteady
BIG Records

It's tough to pin a tag on the lapel of Big Head Todd and the Monsters. The band ably jumps from flat-out rock and roll to deep blues, even jazz, funk, and soulful R&B.

Rocksteady is the band's eighth studio release. With tracks honed on the road, the groove is already cut deep on this disc.

Big Head Todd is Todd Park Mohr, bandleader and frontman of the trio that came out of Colorado in the mid '80s. Mohr guides the power trio as a fine guitar-slinger, ably backed by drummer Brian Nevin and Rob Squires on bass and vocals.

Straight out of the box, the title track rocks with a feral intensity. With a Jamaican vibe, the rhythm isn't pure rock steady, nor is it ska or reggae. But it rides a rocking blend of JA cool and the band's own vibe.

The cover tunes offer a unique take

on classics; their version of the Rolling Stones' "Beast of Burden" gives satisfaction. And they make their take of Tom Russell's "Muhammad Ali" all their own. The deepest cut on the disc may well be the version of Howlin' Wolf's blues warhorse, "Smokestack Lightning." As with their hit cover of John Lee Hooker's "Boom-Boom," the song starts as a near duplicate recreation of the original, before they rock it their own way. Good stuff. — **MD**



Gilkyson, Gorka, Kaplansky
Red Horse
Red House Records

Eliza Gilkyson, John Gorka, and Lucy Kaplansky have played on each other's albums and shared concert stages, but the idea for a group album surfaced when they played together during Red House Records 25th Anniversary tour. The experience was so positive they decided to record an album.

Ask experienced solo artists why they're solo artists instead of members of a band and you'll get an earful on the issues and personal politics involved in musical partnerships. *Red Horse* isn't an attempt at group-forming as much as it is an exercise in collaboration. The artists brought some of their most emblematic material and used the other members to fill out the arrangements. On Neil Young's "I Am A Child" Gilkyson handles lead vocals and serves as "song boss." On Gilkyson's "Wild Horse," Gorka leads, while on Gorka's "Blue Chalk" Kaplansky takes the reins. In each case, the song leader is prominent and the other principals serve as accompanists. None of the songs get a full trio treatment where everyone must add equally to the song. Guitar-slinger extraordinaire Duke Levine adds his wizardry on guitar, mandola, lap-steel, and baritone guitar.

The sparseness of the arrangements is refreshing. The '70s proved that, with rare exceptions, the super-group concept of putting solo artists together, and expecting magic rarely works. *Red Horse* isn't an attempt to duplicate the idea. Instead, it's a collaboration based on music rather than marketing. The results will please anyone who values intelligent music making. — **SS**



Duke Robillard
Passport to the Blues
Stony Plain Records

One of the busiest players around today, Duke takes a break from touring, producing, and recording jazz, jump-swing, and bop to crank out his most uncompromising blues set in 20 years.

Twelve original songs and a cover offer gritty guitar, gravelly vocals, and grinding rhythm. "Workin' Hard for my Uncle" is Robillard's ode to the taxman, and hits a little close to home. The disc closer, "Bradford Boogie," reminds us that Robillard is a master at weaving inspired guitar solos that keep going, bar after bar, yet never repeat themselves.

Unlike recent Robillard releases, guitar is front-and-center here, with saxophone moved to the side. Still, Robillard is accompanied by a capable crew that includes musicians with whom he has played for years. Stand-out cuts include "Rhode Island Red Rooster," an homage to the Chicago blues of Muddy Waters and his ilk, "The High Cost of Lovin'," co-written with Doc Pomus, "Duke's Evening Blues" for its spoken-word vocal track, and "Grey Sky Blues," which captures slow blues that is familiar and fresh with a full horn section backing and those long guitar solos for which Duke is known.

For years, Robillard's vocals have been down in the mix, but here, it's out front and delivered with a staccato blast by someone who tells it like it is, lyrically. And with those (mostly Fender) guitars ringing through the set, it's him doing what he does best. — **ECS**



Andy Cohen
Built Right On The Ground
Earwig

In his liner notes, William Lee Ellis (a formidable folk-blues performer in his own right) calls Cohen "the best-kept secret in folk music." Indeed, two or three songs into this collection should be enough to send the uninitiated on multiple internet searches.

Among his influences, Cohen lists Blind Lemon Jefferson, Leadbelly, Big Bill Broonzy, Skip James, Bukka White, Rev. Robert Wilkins, Brownie McGhee, and, most profoundly, Rev. Gary Davis. In case you hadn't guessed, he's an accomplished fingerpicker. He is also a collector of songs — country, ragtime, boogie-woogie, and a lot of blues — nearly all of them old. For instance, "Temptation Rag" dates from 1909. But Cohen's unhurried rendition has a classical feel, as opposed to Sidney Bechet's raucous treatment or Benny Goodman's speedy version.

The 64-year-old was exposed to Dixieland via his dad's record collection, but Boston, where he grew up, was a hotbed of the Folk Boom when he was in his mid teens.

This set contains only one Cohen original, "Jim Dickinson Stomp," dedicated to the late pianist and producer from Memphis, where Cohen now makes his home. For the instrumental, he broke out his 1905 dolceola — a small keyboard hybrid that has keys that strike clusters of zither-type chords on the left side and a miniature run of tiny piano keys on the right. (Cohen's

catalog includes one album devoted to the instrument, as well as the aptly titled *Ridiculous Instrumentals* on guitar and an album of Rev. Gary Davis material.)

Cohen switches effortlessly from Broonzy's dead-thumb style on "Mopper's Blues" to alternating bass a la John Hurt on the Teddy Darby title track and two Memphis Minnie compositions. "Revivalist" would not be an inaccurate term to describe him, but there's nothing academic in the way he fills decades-old music with vitality. — **DF**



Ben Woolman
Many Moods
Self-distributed

Ben Woolman follows in the footsteps of great acoustic guitarists who need no accompaniment. He supplies clear, concise bass notes mixed with lovely melodies and chord changes to form songs that sound like two or three guitars.

Many Moods uses no overdubs, and the majority of its 11 cuts here were composed by Woolman. All offer great playing and memorable moments; "One Afternoon" is a sprightly tune that perfectly shows his right-hand mastery as the lovely changes mix with non-stop bass notes. The minor key of the jaw-dropping "Mazurka Dance" has an amazing bass line that counters the chords and melodies. He shows jazz influences on "Salamander Swing" with its jazzy chords and melody. For straight blues, he uses some of Blind Blake's own music to embellish his "Blake Says."

His covers include The Police's "Invisible Sun," which he gives a perfectly moody spin, while James Horner's theme from *Legends of the Fall* captures the orchestral majesty of the original.

Woolman is the latest in a line of players that includes Leo Kottke and Michael Hedges. He doesn't always go out on a limb the same way, but his technique is flawless and his feel is very comfortable. — **JH**



Jeff Richman
Like That
Nefer Records

Jazz guitarist Jeff Richman's latest is full of great songs that leave ample room for chops, and he enlists A-list help (including drummer Vinnie Colaiuta and bassists Neil Stubenhaus and Dean Taub) to purvey the 10 excellent tunes.

The title cut is a laid-back funk with chord changes that call to mind Steely Dan at its jazziest; Richman effortlessly navigates the changes and gets a little nasty as the solo wraps. Colaiuta adds