

the highly successful *Aqualung* album with the progressive rock classic, *Thick As A Brick*. It was written as a spoof in response to the critical reception of *Aqualung*, which was proclaimed a concept album (it was not), and a parody of prog rock bands like Yes and Genesis. And *Thick As A Brick* remains the only album in history to reach #1 on the *Billboard* charts containing only one song.

At 43 minutes, the album centers on a poem by a fictional eight-year-old boy named Gerald Bostock whose parents lied about his age. The album uses newspaper articles continuing the story, phony local journalism, and self-deprecating humor about the band. This elaborate prog-rock parody, complete with acoustic and electric instruments, time-signature changes and tempo shifts, is an amazing piece of music in its own right. It's a masterful concoction of epic rock, jazz, folk, and classical influences, as well as surreal British humor.

To celebrate the 40th anniversary of the album, EMI has released a CD and DVD version of the album enclosed in a hardback book in newspaper form. The CD contains a remix by producer/guitarist Steven Wilson, while the DVD offers three mixes, including one in surround sound, and the original mix. It also comes with a 100-page book with the original newspaper material, interviews, an article by Dom Lawson, tour mementos, and lots of wacky band photos.

Martin Barre plays guitar like an expert throughout, allowing his skill and craft on the instrument to act as a conduit for Anderson's inspired concepts and ideas. It's a picaresque journey with twists and turns and dazzling imagery. Amazingly, Anderson was 25 when he wrote *Thick As A Brick*, and 40 years later it stands the test of time. — **OJ**



Charlie Parr
Barnswallow
Self-distributed

Charlie Parr's blues are the real deal. It's like the difference between acid-washed, stone-tumbled blue jeans and the Levis you wore in yourself doing honest-to-goodness chores. There's no attempt here to sound retro, no revivalist "save the blues" mentality. These are lived-in, slept-in blues.

Parr hails from the Spam capital of the world, Austin, Minnesota, where he grew up sans TV but with his dad's record collection that included Charley Patton, Woody Guthrie, and Leadbelly. Said dad thoughtfully traded a perfectly fine Johnson 9-horsepower outboard motor for a guitar to provide his son a constructive outlet for his energies. Teaching himself guitar and banjo, Parr soon lit out for the bright lights of that big city, Duluth, where he's been mostly based from ever since.

Barnswallow is Parr's 11th album, and amazingly, they just keep getting

better. Parr's "tours" consist of sleeping in highway rest stops, cooking meals on his mini-van's exhaust manifold, and playing his music each night with serious passion. Talk about commitment.

He employs a wood-bodied National resonator, a Fraulini 12-string guitar made by Todd Cambio, and a Kevin Enoch fretless banjo. The album was cut live to tape with no tracking, Parr playing in a trio with Mikkel Beckmen on washboard and Dave Hundreiser on harmonica. And they used all first or second takes.

The album opens with "Jimmy Bell," a lengthy, rousing foot-stomper. He fingerpicks the ethereal folk song "Badger" on his National while "Rattlesnake" is a charging slide jam. "Jesus Is A Hobo" features Emily Parr adding harmony vocals.

Barnswallow feels both timeless and out of time. It's the sound of a modern-day country blues troubadour living as he sees fit and singing as he lives. — **MD**



Louisiana Red
When My Mama Was Living
Labor Records

Bluesman Louisiana Red passed away in February 2012. His sudden departure at 79 left a legacy of great recordings and a legend that loomed large. He was the archetype wayfaring bluesman with a voice that conveyed a tough and troubled life, along with a wicked slide and harmonica playing style. Red earned 14 nominations and two awards from the Memphis Blues Foundation plus a W.C. Handy Award in 1983. He was a highly respected performer who recorded for a handful of labels including Checkers, Earwig, Roulette, Bluestown, Ruf, and 1972's *Louisiana Red Sings the Blues* for Atco. His regional R&B hits include "I'm Too Poor To Die" and "Red's Dream" from the early '60s.

When My Mama Was Living features unreleased sessions from the '70s with a little help from Peg Leg Sam and Lefty Dizz. Red feels every note and shares the raw pain of a troubled existence through eight originals, while adding his own unique thumbprint to songs by Fred McDowell, Gary Davis, Kent Cooper, and Slim Harpo. The 16 tracks are full of the cold, grim, and dark subject matter that hardcore blues fans worship. It's jam-packed with earnest, downhome shouts, growls, and howls that can only come from someone who has lived the life. The exceptions are moving performances of "King Bee," "Got A Girl With A Dog Won't Bark," and "Little Suzie Jane" where Red takes a lighter approach.

These are the kinds of blues you listen to when you want to hear the real deal. It's from the heart, the soul, the earth, and the human condition. With its sparse musicianship and no nonsense rustic style, it's a fitting tribute to a blues legend that will undoubtedly hit you where you live. — **OJ**



Crack the Sky
Ostrich
Aluminum Cat Recordings

Crack the Sky never gives up. Their music is by turns funky, industrial, crunchy, and occasionally just weird. And their lyrics are cynical, biting, goofy, and guaranteed to make you smile—or cringe on occasion when you disagree with some of chief songwriter John Palumbo's observations.

Going all the way back to their brilliant debut record in 1975, the band has had a way to make guitars sound different and downright cool. Guitarists Palumbo, Rick Witkowski, and Bobby Hird make it funky on "The Box" and "Happy Happy Happy." The occasional jazz chord mixes with ninth chords that would have made Jimmy Nolen smile. The latter song also features a solo that is the perfect mix of inside and outside playing, gracefully darting in and out of the punchy horns.

Two of the soloists trade licks on "Your House Is On Fire" before they meld into one harmonized solo. That song, like several on this album, evolves into a feel that can only be called industrialized funk. It's not something new for the band. That first record, almost 40 years old now, had a great song called "She's A Dancer" that ended with what can best be described as a funky freakout, as if it had been programmed by musical robots. That feel is apparent on parts of this record too.

Other guitar highlights include "Holding My Breath" with its stunning rock sound, the spooky Middle Eastern-flavored soloing on "Under The Hood," and the West Coast sound of "Pole Dancing In Hollywood."

Any time this band makes an appearance, it's worth listening to, but *Ostrich* might be their best effort since their '70s classics. — **JH**



Butch Thompson & Pat Donohue
Vicksburg Blues
Red House

Here's a glorious step back in time. Pianist/clarinetist Butch Thompson and guitarman Pat Donohue pay homage to the olden-day blues duos like Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell. With stellar musicianship, warm sound, and beautiful recording quality, this is a small masterpiece.

The two are "Prairie Home Companion" radio regulars. Donohue has one Grammy to his name and is a National Finger Picking Guitar Champion. Thompson is a recognized traditional jazz and ragtime master who played Preservation Hall at age 18; he also boasts a Grammy of his own. On this album they pay due homage to their influences—and do it right.

The 19 tracks range from Blind Blake's "Poker Woman" to James P. Johnson's "You Can't Lose A Broken Heart," several Carr classics, and a variety of tunes by Thompson's mentor, Little Brother Montgomery.

Donohue plays like he has Southern soil under his fingernails, despite the fact that he hails from St. Paul, Minnesota. His fingerpicking interweaves with the piano lines, offering counterpoint and syncopation. He plays a masterful slide, evoking the era in his tone and stylings. The result is a set of soulful blues and rollicking jazz tunes.

"If I Had You" is a standout, blending Thompson's clarinet with Donohue's fingerpicking. The duo's original, "That D Strain," is a romp, highlighted by hot jazz guitar riffs.

Donohue employs a National Resophonic Style O and his own Martin OM-30DB Signature Model, both offering a fine blend of vintage sound and modern-day clarity. Who says they don't build them like they used to? — **MD**



John Hartford
Aero-Plain/Morning Bugle: The Complete Warner Bros. Collection
Real Gone Music

Glory be! It's about time John Hartford's 1971 masterpiece *Aereo-Plain* is re-released. And Real Gone has done it right, adding outtakes and his follow-up album, 1972's *Morning Bugle*, to the package.

Hartford may be best known as the double-Grammy-winning composer of 1967's "Gentle On My Mind," which Glen Campbell, Elvis, and Dean Martin all sang to the top. But as the '60s turned into the '70s, Hartford's sense of humor took charge and he combined his love of bluegrass with a wry wit. After four albums with RCA, he moved to Warner Bros. and was offered free rein to let loose.

Aereo-Plain was an all-round tour de force. Hartford's prodigious banjo picking was backed by a stellar band roster that's still downright unbelievable 40 years on: Tut Taylor on Dobro, Vassar Clements on fiddle, Norman Blake on guitar and mandolin, and Earl Scruggs' son, Randy, on bass. Amazing.

Hartford's songs are rooted in traditional music but touched by his quirk. He blended old and new to create something unique: color him as the Cheap Suit Serenaders of bluegrass. The result was a cult following for this long out-of-print, hard-to-find classic.

The album is book-ended by "Turn Your Radio On," a glorious evocation of old-time gospel and the wonders of the air waves arriving from afar. The song sets the tone for all that follows.

"Steamboat Whistle Blues" may just be Hartford's second masterpiece, after "Gentle On My Mind," but it's a world away in style and spunk. It was based on Hartford's lifelong fascination with riverboats, combining a vision of Mark Twain's Americana with '70s caprice.