

Banjo might seem to contradict the album's subtitle, *The Long Form*. Nothing on the 66-minute album stretches past the six-and-a-half minute mark. And yet, playing in the vernacular of conversational, instrumental, old-time music, the duo's 13 tracks contain multitudes. Without vocals, the veteran musicians breeze through songs' heads and spread out, fiddler Godchaux widening melodies, and Rothman digging in to find pastoral new spaces within traditional changes, his banjo juggling notes into bright new spots deep in "Texas Gallop" and well-worn fare like "Sail Away Ladies." The duo's shared history with the Grateful Dead—Rothman as a bluegrass jam partner with Jerry Garcia stretching back to the early '60s, Godchaux as brother to and collaborator with Dead keyboardist Keith—would seem to set them up for the job, but so do their subsequent careers. Whatever its pedigree, *The Red Fiddle & The Silver Banjo* is a lush and excellent listen, in the foreground as a pair of excellent players conversing, or in the background as the wordless beautiful texture of American string band music in one of its most casual and elegant manifestations. *Jesse Jarnow*

**Todd Rundgren**

**Global** CHERRY RED/ESOTERIC ANTENNA



After a spate of recent releases that provided forays into cosmic cacophony, fearsome blues and radically redefined versions of the seminal songs he produced for others, creative chameleon **Todd Rundgren** offers an assertive follow-up that finds him back in familiar terrain. That's fortuitous, too. State, his last album, was more experimental than accessible, which is always a risk, given his eclectic ambitions. Sadder still, Todd tended to distance all but the most devoted. Yet while *Global* gleams from the same synthesized setup, fortunately, there's plenty here to keep the crowds enthralled. "Evrybody" is an entreaty to clap hands, join the party and share in the communal bond. "Rise" and "Skyscraper" bring Utopia to mind, while "Soothe" is a big ballad in the Todd tradition. Elsewhere, the universal embrace offered by "Global Nation," and the worldly rhythms employed on "Holyland" are the very things that make *Global* sound true to its title. *Lee Zimmerman*

**Toro Y Moi**

**What For?** CARPARK



**Chaz Bundick** was burdened with the "chill-wave" tag early on, but he's spent the rest of his young career eclipsing it. The songwriter/producer has built an identity of sonic exploration, restlessly pushing himself from evocative bedroom soundscapes into full-fledged funk and psych-pop. *What For?*, his fourth album under the **Toro Y Moi** moniker, is another revelatory step forward, showcasing Bundick's skills as an old-school rock craftsman. Recruiting like-minded collaborators **Ruban Nielson** (Unknown Mortal Orchestra) and multi-instrumentalist **Julian Lynch**, he hurtles himself back into the early 1970s—an era when virtuosity and hooks weren't contradictory concepts. With its creamy funk-rock guitars and mind-melting fuzz-pedal solos, "Spell It

Out" suggests the Doobie Brothers crashing a psychedelic disco; the hazy, jazzy groove of "The Flight" echoes both Steely Dan and Todd Rundgren. *What For?* condenses the entire decade into 10 shapeshifting tracks, each refracted through Bundick's seductive lens.

*Ryan Reed*

**Surfer Blood**

**1000 Palms** JOYFUL NOISE



It is always a big gamble when an underground band signs with a major label, as **Surfer Blood** soon discovered after sealing the deal with Warner Bros. for their second LP, 2013's *Pythons*. Though a fine album, corporate imposition made the experience a frustrating endeavor. Now free from their time in the music-industrial complex, the band once again finds solace in the independent community, signing with the excellent imprint Joyful Noise. And when left to their own devices for *1000 Palms*, these guys have turned out the best LP of their young careers. For these 11 new tunes, Surfer Blood eschew the Pixies-style fuzz stomp of their previous material in favor of a cleaner, more vibrant sound with a nod to the '80s. But as the edgy jangle of songs like "Point of No Return" and "Dorian" testify, the inspiration comes more from CMJ than MTV. Yet perhaps the most definitive statement of emancipation comes in the form of the C86-esque "Other Desert Cities." Utilizing nothing more than an acoustic guitar and a field recording of birds chirping in a backyard, it is a song that exposes a bright new chapter in the career of this most excellent and underrated pop group. *Ron Hart*

**Cabinet**

**Celebration** SELF-RELEASED



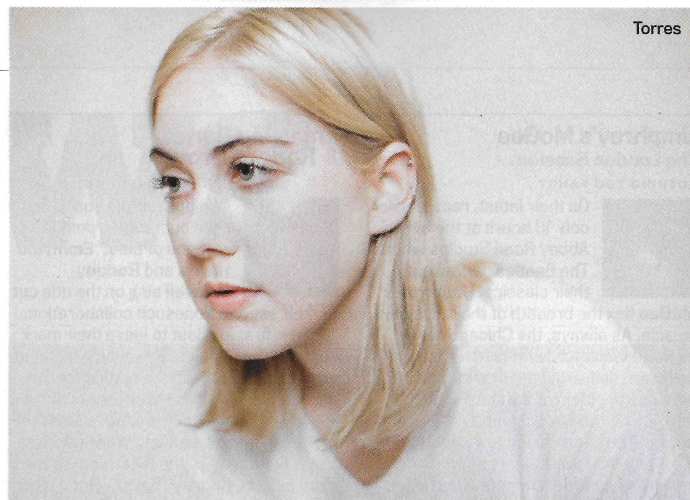
While bluegrass diehards will enjoy **Cabinet's** third studio release *Celebration*, few tracks are conventional. Still, these progressive acoustic tunes radiate nostalgia. *Celebration* contains an honest, buoyant assortment of Americana that deems the listener an old, familiar friend. The sextet has strengthened its vocal prowess this time around, with delicate three- and four-part harmonies on tunes such as "Red River Valley" and "Tears Of Laughter." The album's title track is the centerpiece of their blues antithesis, containing lyrics such as, "You gotta know what love is if you're gonna love someone." Though no particular player acts definitively as soloist, string-slingers **Pappy Biondo**, **J.P. Biondo** and **Mickey Coviello** weave blazing melodic textures throughout. The strongest tune of the bunch, lyrically, is "Pennsylvania," which feels like losing yourself in a Norman Blake daydream. It's Cabinet's assured optimism that elevates *Celebration* to its whole, cohesive potential. *Dylan Muhlberg*

**Torres**

**Sprinter** PARTISAN



For her incredible second album as **Torres**, **Mackenzie Scott** doubles down on all those PJ Harvey comparisons big time. First,



Torres

she traveled to the singer's English hometown of Bridport, Dorset to partially record this new nine-song cycle, as well as the Bristol studio of Portishead guitarist **Adrian Utley**, who plays on the majority of the record as well. Next, she reunited the original Harvey rhythm section of bassist **Ian Oliver** and drummer **Robert Ellis** for the first time since 1992's *Dry*, an album as old as Scott herself. And what she crafts here with this crew of British alt-icons is not so much an emulation of *Rid Of Me*—era Polly as it is a conjuring of that feral feminism channeled through her descriptive, and literally heartfelt, recounting of her conservative Baptist upbringing in Macon, Ga. (as heard on blistering cuts like opening track "Strange Hellos" and the righteous "Cowboy Guilt"). Yet when *Sprinter* reaches the finish line, Scott lets out a breathless sigh in the form of two heart-stopping ballads in "The Harshest Light" and "The Exchange" that really open up the listener's ears to the truth behind her songcraft. Make no mistake, Torres is a force to be reckoned with. *Ron Hart*

**Ron Sexsmith**

**Carousel One** COMPASS



Despite praise from the likes of Paul McCartney, Elvis Costello and Ray Davies, **Ron Sexsmith** remains humble, creating vivid pop sketches flush with humanity and humility. Consequently, *Carousel One* offers another example of Sexsmith's savvy and skill, a combination of irrepressible melodies and a winsome vocal that is occasionally downcast but rarely despondent. At times, his casual croon brings Davies to mind—"Getaway Car" and "Nothing Feels the Same Anymore" being the best examples—and indeed, hints of McCartney's unflappable cheer and Costello's wit and irony are also evident as well. "How am I supposed to help you if I can't get myself together?" he asks pleadingly on the self-effacing "Can't Get My Act Together." The answer is simple: He doesn't need to worry. One spin of *Carousel One* offers proof positive that Sexsmith's songs are as good as it gets. *Lee Zimmerman*

**Giant Sand**

**Heartbreak Pass** NEW WEST



After 30 years and almost as many records, one would think that **Howe Gelb** and his Sandpeople would run out of ideas. That

is certainly not the case here, and the Troubadour of Tucson unbuckles his seatbelt and plows the Plymouth straight into the musical desert for more songs rendered unusual and off-kilter. His quirky poetic sensibility informs "Heavenually," and the band gets tribal on "Hurtin' Habit," makes good use of glitches and tweaks on a weirdly gruesome "Transponder," then becomes staid and straightforward on "Every Now and Then." Gelb paints a humorous picture of domestic bliss on "Home Sweat Home," then visits the barroom on the luscious instrumental "Bitter Suite." In less capable hands, this would sound like an inconsistent hodgepodge but, as usual, Gelb's quixotic presence glues it all together. So here is another **Giant Sand** record, fit for a road trip on a dark highway or a head trip in a dark room. *Michael Verity*

**Mercies**

**Blue Against Green** RANDM



LA-by-way-of-Connecticut "forest-pop" trio **Mercies'** sophomore album, *Blue Against Green*, is a delicate and graceful creation. *Blue* spans 11 tracks that easily fall into the indie category, though it would be an injustice to call it indie and leave it at that. Produced in San Diego by **Mike Butler**, whose credits include executive producing American Babies' 2013 Americana record *Knives And Teeth*, Mercies' creative process couldn't have been in better hands. Lyrical content is mainly concerned with the tribulations of life, love and relocating to a new environment. The entire record carries a sort of fish-out-of-water-learning-to-breathe-air-type of ambience. Standout portions include the reverb-soaked skank-guitar verses in "White Fir," and the poignant poetry throughout the subdued yet uplifting "We Tried": "It's all that we know/ we're like hunters/ we're drawing back our bows/ we close one eye/ and watch our arrows fly." *Peter DeStefano*

**Altan**

**The Widening Gyre** COMPASS



Borrowing its title from a poem by W.B. Yeats, *The Widening Gyre* finds this veteran Celtic combo journeying to Nashville, Tenn., and intertwining their Irish roots with ample doses of Appalachian mountain music and strictly American bluegrass. Guests **Mary Chapin Carpenter**, **Alison Brown**, **Tim O'Brien**,