

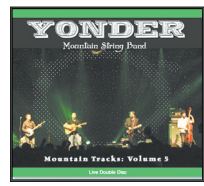


In Tune

The Daily News

THURSDAY, APRIL 17, 2008

Harmonic convergence



YONDER MOUNTAIN STRING BAND, "Mountain Tracks: Volume 5" (Frog Pad) ★★☆☆ — Like their predecessors at the top of the influential Colorado jamgrass scene — the late and sorely lamented String Cheese Incident — Yonder Mountain haven't flourished in the recording studio. But no matter. Like most bands of their ilk, the Yonder Mountaineers aren't in the game because they cover heavy rotation on radio playlists. Live is where they thrive.

And that's why there is "Mountain Tracks," a series that, through its first four volumes, took the best of YMSB's concert pieces from the previous year or so and wove them into a seamless compilation approximating a typical live set. "Volume 5" expands that formula to include a disc of show standouts from 2004-07, and a second disc that reprises the much-sought after July 21, 2007, show from the Lifestyle Communities Pavilion in Columbus, Ohio.

Both discs sizzle with YMSB's distinct take on the traditional, using their core instruments — guitar, banjo, mandolin and bass — to plot a fairly straight acoustic course before veering off onto side roads that visit funk, folk, jazz, rock and any number of permutations involving all of the above.

Which is why you'll find age-old standards such as "Don't Let Your Deal Go Down" right beside bassist Ben Kaufmann's "Things You're Selling," and Bill Monroe's "Kentucky Mandolin" following a suite of originals by mandolinist Jeff Austin, banjo player Dave Johnston, Kaufmann and guitarist Adam Aijala.

With some two hours of music to sift through, there is something for everyone's tastes here. (DF)

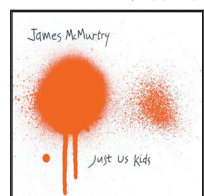


LEONA LEWIS, "Spirit" (J Records) ★☆☆ — Anointed the "next big thing" by none other than "American Idol" resident grump Simon Cowell, 23-year-old London-born singer Leona Lewis is being groomed for stardom. She won "The X Factor," Britain's "Idol" equivalent, by a landslide in December 2006 and promptly landed a record deal.

"Spirit" was released to great acclaim in England last year — soaring to the top of the charts in record time — and Lewis is trying to match that success on these shores. Her debut single, "Bleeding Love," has earned her comparisons to Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey, though it remains to be seen if U.S. audiences will embrace her.

J Records wisely revamped the track list on "Spirit," adding some up-tempo R&B tunes in place of some ballads that appear on the original incarnation. Though Lewis has the chops to sing the slow stuff, the vocal histrionics on songs like "Footprints in the Sand" make her sound like a Mariah/Whitney/Celine Dion wannabe.

Among the better entries on "Spirit" are "Forgive Me," an inspired cover of Roberta Flack's "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" and "Misses Glass." This is a solid first effort, but the jury remains out on whether Leona Lewis has what it takes to be the next international diva. Or even the next Kelly Clarkson. (Jeffrey Sisk)



JAMES McMURTRY, "Just Us Kids" (Lightning Rod Records) ★☆☆ — Texas singer-songwriter James McMurtry is mad as hell and he's not gonna take it any more. At least that's the impression McMurtry gives on "Just Us Kids," his ninth — and arguably most political — record.

His disdain for President Bush and the Iraq War are evident in "God Bless America (Pat MacDonald Must Die)" and the catchy "Cheney's Toy," while "Hurricane Party" recounts the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. Yet McMurtry is at his best weaving distinctly American tales such as "Ruby and Carlos," the outstanding title track and "Fire Line Road."

Known more for his songwriting than his singing, McMurtry has honed his gruff drawl over the years. It's not the best voice you'll ever hear, but it melds perfectly with the material. And really, that's the important thing. (JS)



LISSA SCHNECKENBURGER, "Song" (Footprint Records) ★☆☆ — Fiddler Lissa Schneckenburger taps into her New England roots on "Song," a collection of 10 folk tunes that explore the region's rich musical heritage.

Among the better efforts here are "Jam on Gerry's Rock/Willie's," which tells the tragic tale of a logger who was killed while breaking up a logjam; "Harmony," featuring stellar accompanying vocals from Stefan Amidon and Eric Merrill; and disc highlight "Lumberman in Town/Go Ken Go."

Born in Maine and now based in Vermont, Schneckenburger does justice to these tunes — some of which date back to the 1700s — that show Appalachia didn't corner the market on traditional American music. (JS)



IN FLIGHT RADIO, "The Sound Inside" (Last Broadcast Records) ★☆☆ — After making a regional splash with their self-titled debut record in 2006, New York-based In Flight Radio fine-tuned their lineup. New guitarist Darko Saric and drummer Mike Dawson joined vocalist Peira and bassist Devin Krug to help flesh out the band's

pop-rock sound.

The result is "The Sound Inside," a solid sophomore effort that flirts with greatness, at times, before ultimately revealing that In Flight Radio remain a talented work in progress.

The quartet shines on keepers such as "Red Flags," "Somewhere in Between" and "Yelling Up to the Sky" — Peira seems to be channeling Cranberries vocalist Dolores O'Riordan at times — but the 11-track collection feels padded ("The Sound Inside" clocks in at more than 48 minutes) and some judicious editing might have helped. Songs such as "Finish Line" and "Just Walk Away" wouldn't have been missed. (JS)



FRED EAGLESMITH, "Tinderbox" (A Major Label) ★☆☆ — Canadian singer-songwriter Fred Eaglesmith might hail from the Great White North, but his music is pure Americana. On "Tinderbox," his 17th release, Eaglesmith masterfully blends country, folk, gospel and rock to create an 18-track musical odyssey through the Bible Belt.

Songs such as "Sweet Corn," "Shoulder to the Plow" and "Worked Up Field" call to mind Eaglesmith's childhood on the family farm, while he tackles the universal topic of love on the hauntingly perfect "Quietly."

But most of "Tinderbox" plays like an alternative gospel record, if there is such a thing. Tunes "Fancy God," the title



Bluegrass supergroup Longview get together again for another lesson in high and lonesome 'physics'

LONGVIEW, "Deep in the Mountains" (Rounder) ★☆☆

— Almost 14 years after a one-shot all-star gathering to celebrate Rounder Record's 25th anniversary first brought them together, the members of Longview have reconvened for their fourth experiment in what mandolinist Don Rigsby calls "bluegrass physics." Which, he explains, is based on one basic tenet: "If I can't make them sound good, they're not going to be able to make me sound good. That's just one of the laws — the whole is no greater than the sum of its parts."

Despite the departure of Dudley Connell, Joe Mullins and Glen Duncan, Longview's sum still represents some pretty powerful parts. The lineup, already a veritable who's who of contemporary Americana, now includes guitarist Lou Reid (Seldom Scene, Doyle Lawson and Quicksilver, Ricky Scaggs), fiddler Ron Stewart (New South, Lonesome River Band, Rhonda Vincent) and iconic banjo player and New South bandleader J.D. Crowe, as well as Longview originals Rigsby, bassist Marshall Wilborn and singer James King.

track, "I Pray Now," "Get On Your Knees" and "Stand" could be performed by your local church choir. If you go to a really hip church, that is. Some of the religion-themed tracks are uplifting; others reflect Eaglesmith's disillusionment with the world we live in.

Though his songs have been covered by artists ranging from Toby Keith to Mary Gauthier to the Cowboy Junkies, Fred Eaglesmith isn't a household name. This first-rate album should change that. (JS)



GOSSIP, "Live in Liverpool" (Columbia) ★☆☆ — If you weren't aware of indie rock trio Gossip's icon status in the homosexual community prior to giving "Live in Liverpool" a spin, there's no doubt after just one listen.

Much to the delight of the crowd, brash Gossip frontwoman Beth Ditto dedicates songs to the gays and lesbians in attendance (she refers to them affectionately by terms that are off-limits in heterosexual society). Politics aside, the music on this CD/DVD set is good.

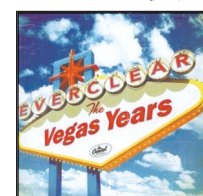
Ditto, an advocate for plus-size ladies everywhere, is in top form, bashing her way through 13 mostly enjoyable tunes — including a fun up-tempo cover of Wham's "Careless Whisper."

The instrumental muscle represented here is obviously formidable — as evidenced by the lightning lick-trading and break-taking of "Cotton Eyed Joe" — but it is their mastery of the genre's trademark three-part harmony that sets Longview apart from the pack. "Deep in the Mountains" has Rigsby, King and Reid taking turns singing lead, and everybody else gets at least one shot at a harmony part.

King, whose day job is fronting his own James King Band, gets the most time with the lead mic, and makes the best of it on mid-tempo ballads "Don't Leave Me Alone," "Baptism of Jesse Taylor," "I Love You Yet," and the up-tempo chugger "Georgia Bound." Rigsby helms three tracks, most notably the high and lonesome tearjerker "At the First Fall of Snow," while Reid proves to be a worthy replacement for Connell on three tracks of his own, with disc-opener "Eating Out of Your Hand" arguably the standout. All three share lead and harmonies on "Weathered Grey Stone," the record's best example of "bluegrass physics." (Dave Fennessy)

Keepers include "Yr Mangled Heart," "Standing in the Way of Control," "Listen Up" and "Are You That Somebody?" — songs that charted in the United Kingdom.

Gossip remain under the radar for most American audiences, but this enjoyable set might help raise their profile in their homeland. (JS)

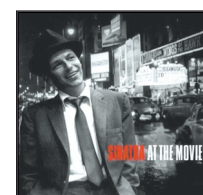


EVERCLEAR, "The Vegas Years" (Capitol) ★☆☆ — Alternative rockers Everclear peaked in popularity more than decade ago with their superb breakthrough album "So Much for the Afterglow" coming on the heels of the equally good "Sparkle and Fade." And though they've continued to record, churning out four albums

between 2000 and 2006, the Portland, Ore.-based band hasn't matched its mid-'90s success.

Frontman Art Alexakis and his mates are taking a different approach with "The Vegas Years," an album of cover tunes. Included are a pair of previously unreleased tracks — a so-so reading of Hall & Oates' "Rich Girl" and a killer rendition of Paul Revere & the Raiders' "Kicks" — and 13 studio and concert performances.

Among the more enjoyable efforts are covers of Thin Lizzy ("The Boys Are Back in Town"), Yaz ("Bad Connection"), Tom Petty ("American Girl") and Neil Young ("Pocahontas"). Less effective are Everclear's readings of the Go-Go's ("Our Lips Are Sealed"), Van Morrison ("Brown Eyed Girl") and their ode to campy television (revamped theme songs for "Land of the Lost" and "Speed Racer") weren't necessary. (JS)



FRANK SINATRA, "Sinatra At the Movies" (Capitol) ★☆☆ — Though he's been dead since 1998, Frank Sinatra remains The Man. He was, is and always will be the standard by which all other crooners are judged.

There's nothing on "Sinatra At the Movies" that we haven't heard before — it's a collection of 20 tunes he contributed to films over the years — but, as always, it's a delight to listen to Ol' Blue Eyes do his thing.

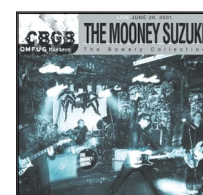
The album underscores the knack Sinatra had for making good songs such as "(Love Is) The Tender Trap" and "All of Me" great, and turning great songs such as "The Lady Is a Tramp" and "Chicago" into classics. Perhaps even more impressive was how Sinatra could make even pedestrian tunes like "From Here to Eternity" and "Three Coins in the Fountain" into something you'll enjoy listening to almost in spite of yourself.

Additional standouts on "Sinatra At the Movies" include "All the Way," "Young At Heart," "High Hopes," "I Love Paris" and "I Couldn't Sleep a Wink Last Night." There's not a bad performance in the bunch — did the Chairman of the Board ever record a clunker? — though I'd have preferred fewer ballads. This is a worthy addition to your collection — especially if you're a fan. (JS)



THE TOASTERS, "CBGB OMFUG Masters: The Bowery Collection" (MVD Audio) ★☆☆ — The Toasters helped pave the way for future American ska bands after emerging from the New York City underground scene in the mid-1980s. Fronted by British expat Rob Hingley, the only original member to stick with the band throughout the years, the group has continued to tour and make albums. "CBGB OMFUG Masters: The Bowery Collection" was recorded during the Toasters' June 28, 2002, performance at the late Hilly Kristal's iconic New York music club. It was the group's first performance at CBGB's since 1988 and surely won't be remembered as one of their best.

While the group's signature brass and saxophone sections are in fine form here, Hingley's vocals are muddy and his singing is too often off-key. There are a few enjoyable moments — "Shocker," "Mona," "Can I Get Another?" — but not enough to make this worth adding to your iPod. (JS)



THE MOONEY SUZUKI, "CBGB OMFUG Masters: The Bowery Collection" (MVD Audio) ★☆☆ — New York garage punk quartet the Mooney Suzuki never got as big as I thought they would. The quartet exploded onto the scene in 2001 with sophomore full-length "Electric Sweat," and upped their profile a year later by contributing the title track to the Jack Black film "School of Rock."

Though their frenzied live shows never translated into big record sales (they've bounced around from label to label the past four years), the band's energy is captured nicely on "CBGB OMFUG Masters: The Bowery Collection." Recorded on June 29, 2001, the 10-track, 32-minute set sticks mainly to tunes from "Electric Sweat" and their "People Get Ready" debut.

It is a no-frills performance — minimal stage chatter — played at ear-bleeding volume, much to the delight of the CBGB crowd. The Mooney Suzuki have mellowed some with age, and this is a nice reminder of the good old days. (JS)



THE PANDERERS, "Hostshot's Boy" (Snack Bar) ★☆☆ — If you got to Sunday's Mike Doughty show at Mr. Smalls in Millvale early enough, chances are you heard the Panderers, the brainchild of Indiana singer-songwriter Scott Wynn. This enjoyable EP is the first release on Doughty's Snack Bar label and gives every indication that the Panderers have a bright future.

The best song on the five-track collection is disc-opener "Come On," an infectious toe-tapper. "Dig" and "Montana" and "Shane" are almost as good, though the set-closing "Mirrorball" fails to register.

Wynn says his musical goals are "simple and under-complicated" and that he wants to write "brand new old songs, with nothing to prove." I'm not quite sure what that means, but the tunes are pretty darn good. (JS)

Rutili, Califone coming to Palace

By BRIAN KRASMAN
For The Daily News

From Red Red Meat to a band that takes its name from an audio equipment factory, Tim Rutili has kept himself quite busy.

It's been eight albums now for Califone, the latest 2006's "Roots & Crowns," praised as one of the band's finest, tightest efforts to date, and now they're headed to the area with Iron & Wine. Fans of the multi-instrumentalist,

fairly experimental indie rock band can hear their heroes in Greenburg's The Palace Theater.

No word yet on if the band has any new studio heroics in store or if Rutili still has the bizarre recurring dreams about the man-bird creature that inspired their 2004 record "Heron King Blues."

Califone plays main support for Iron & Wine at the Palace Thursday at 7:45 p.m. Tickets are \$25.