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Revisiting the Jayhawks and considering three indies

This week's column kicks off with the first two albums by those country-rockin' Jayhawks, expanded and revisited, quickly followed by a dose of "Southern Alternative Rock" and two other new independent releases from farther away.

'Hollywood Town Hall,' The Jayhawks (American/Legacy, HHHHH)

'Tomorrow The Green Grass: Legacy Edition,' The Jayhawks
(American/Legacy, HHHHH)

These expanded versions of The Jayhawks' first two records were released physically and digitally Jan. 18, following a 2009 Mark Olson/Gary Louris duo album and American/Legacy's career-spanning "Music From The North Country" anthology that same year. Interest in the band is at a peak, so these two new releases deliver insight into their early years.

"Hollywood Town Hall" (HTH) was their Def American 1992 debut, and its re-release comes with five bonus tracks, two previously unreleased and three previously unavailable commercially in the U.S. "Tomorrow The Green Grass" (TTGG), their 1995 follow-up, is now a deluxe double-CD featuring five bonus tracks and a second CD of "Mystery Demos." HTH highlights other than the familiar "Waiting for the Sun," "Settled Down Like Rain" and "Take Me With You (When You Go)" are surprisingly numerous. "Martin's Song" and "Up Above My Head" are my current favorites.

TTGG highlights besides the beautiful "Blue" include "I'd Run Away," the guitar-powered "Real Light," "Over My Shoulder," the Everly-ish "Ann Jane," "Two Hearts" and more. The harmonies, of course, are the main thing on both albums that is so impressive, but there are many other qualities that make these records satisfying, including the demo versions. Fans of alt-country (a genre that seems to have faded away or been absorbed into the mainstream which features more rock-like production) will love these deluxe packages, with their informative liner notes from producer George Drakoulias (for HTH), West Coast country-rock scholar Bud Scoppa (for TTGG) and Minneapolis-based writer PD Larson (who contributes an astute essay to accompany the "Mystery Demos" to rival his contribution to the North Country collection).

'Here I Am,' Hester (Dynasty Records, HHH)

These guys -- Larry Hester: lead vocals/acoustic guitar/harmonica, Tommy Noland: drums, Chris Cockrell: bass and Bryan Austin: lead guitar on CD, Texan Rusty Byard now -- have been playing locally a bit, and lead singer Larry has a long resume. He was born in South Alabama, began writing songs at 10 and touring at 19, ending up in Southern California. His song "Burning" appears in the skateboard cult classic "Thrashin'," and he has songs in other movies. These songs have similar tempos/chord structures.

My current faves are the title song and "Why Can't You Stay," which are "rock ballads" with nifty drums and spicy lead guitar breaks. Investigate online, attend a show featuring some harder-rocking material (Julep Room 10 p.m. on Feb. 11 is next) then snag a copy at local stores or digital outlets.

'Tees Valley Deadbeats,' The Hitchers (Spectra Records, HHHH)

This Jan. 11 CD kicks off with "Bop Til U Drop!"

The exclamation point is their idea, not mine, as is the similarity between their song title and one of the Ramones' "Too Tough to Die" tunes. I guess that Rich (guitar/vocals), Greg (double bass/vocals) and Mike (drums/vocals) may have been unaware of that, so I'll give them a pass because their rockabilly-ish instrumental lineup makes things unique. Things occasionally sound similar to Green Day's "Hitchin' a Ride," but this is a fun album all around. Highlights include the slappin' "Berwick Hills 90210," the propulsive "Shake Ruby UB," the low-key "I Might Never" and the rowdy "Baby Bought a Shotgun."

Those who want a swinging party platter should grab this one.

'Matt Cusson,' Matt Cusson (Cuesound Records, HHH)

This Jan. 11 CD features songs, arrangements and more from singer/songwriter Matt Cusson. Some tunes have instrumental assistance from others, like the nifty horn arrangement on "Every Step;" but he's clearly the one in charge of this album that is primarily built around low-key, piano-based soulful mood music to share with someone special. Highlights include "Here's to You and Me," "A Cappella Interlude" and the string-drenched "Once Upon a Time. My plan is to listen again with my special someone once we've marveled at The Jayhawks' recordings. Listen, and grab a copy if you agree.

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