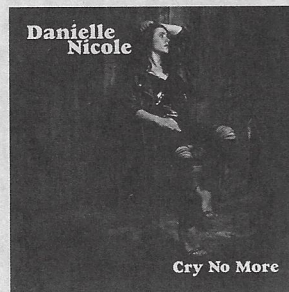


never seeming to rush forward like a modern country ballad. However, there are hints of arena country to be found throughout her records.

Vocally, in one sense, her voice flutters in a style reminiscent at times of Dolly Parton – especially on “Rhythm That Rhymes.” But in total, it’s almost impossible to ignore comparisons to Stevie Nicks. Not only does her voice and styling go right to where Stevie lives and breathes, but songs like “Wings” and “Heart Shattered” seem to be framed in a manner that you’d find on any early ‘80s Stevie Nicks record like *Bella Donna* or *The Wild Heart*.

On the production front, the music is a bit too bright, which is a surprising turn for Douglas, who with all of those early, pre-*Permanent Vacation* Aerosmith records, was known for attaching the band to a warmer kind of rock sound. That doesn’t happen here. Part of this may be due to a “commitment to not commit.” The album doesn’t neatly fit into any particular genre, and this in turn may broaden “the McManus appeal.”

Whatever path that this record takes, its most important role will be in further expanding awareness of Ali McManus and her journey. Much like her hometown of Detroit, Ali openly possesses a “never quit” attitude that ensures that whatever she does will represent her best and it surely will never be her last. —Ray Chelstowski



DANIELLE NICOLE
CRY NO MORE
Concord Records (CD)

★★★

Spinning Danielle Nicole’s sophomore effort *Cry No More*

is like a trip down memory lane. It quickly reminds the listener of early Jonny Lang. It’s a blues-based affair that weaves in and out of hits and misses. The misses don’t stray too far from the hits. But the hits land square and solid. Not surprising, as she is backed by some of the best in the business. Modern day legends like long time Bonnie Raitt sideman Johnny Lee Schell, drummer Tony Braunagel (Taj Mahal), and guitarists Kenny Wayne Sheperd, Walter Trout and Sonny Landreth bring a real sparkle to the record.

Where Danielle shines is when she interprets other people’s songs. The standout in that regard is her cover of the Bill Withers track “Hot Spell.” The arrangement is built solidly around her bass and there is an amount of restraint that makes the song one of the most mature performances on the record. Danielle’s vocals sit somewhere between Susan Tedeschi and Bettye LaVette. However, too often her vocals live within the realm of a howl, instead of exploring what is clearly an impressive range marked by equal amounts of available control. If there’s a drawback to hosting this much musical guest talent is that she seems intent on matching each guitar player’s fire with overflexing her own muscles. Her own songs seem to be where this resides and it tends to make them all sound like a slightly different version of the last. Again, covers for her work best.

In fact, her cover of Prince’s “How Come U Don’t Call Me Anymore” is arguably the finest track on the record. Here she delivers an Eva Cassidy caliber performance that is matched with a tasty measure of guitar work by Monster Mike Welch. It also stands apart in coming in under four minutes in running time. With 14 total tracks that largely live beyond four minutes each, this is a bit indulgent. An EP of songs like “How Come” is welcome any time. That’s the stuff that makes clear why Concord Records brought her on board.

—Ray Chelstowski

QUICK PICKS

BY BRUCE SYLVESTER



HOME FREE
TIMELESS
Columbia (CD)

Genre: Country
Having won NBC’s “The Sing-Off,” these five guys left Minnesota for Nashville and an almost a cappella country vibe, balancing good-old-boy songs with John Mayer’s truth-and-fear-laden “In the Blood.” Bluegrass standard “Man of Constant Sorrow” becomes multi-textured doo-wop.

DOC WATSON
LIVE AT CLUB 47
Yep Roc (CD, LP)

Genre: Traditional Folk
In 1963, blind Arthel Lane Watson (1923-2012) was emerging from North Carolina’s mountains to the national stage. This finely mastered 26-song show was at the ‘60s folk revival’s legendary Club 47 in Cambridge, MA. Chatty and modest, he showed deep respect for his music’s forebears. After a dazzling acoustic guitar run, he charmingly told his audience, “It’s easy.” Doc was the real McCoy of American music.

PAUL THORN
DON'T LET THE
DEVIL RIDE

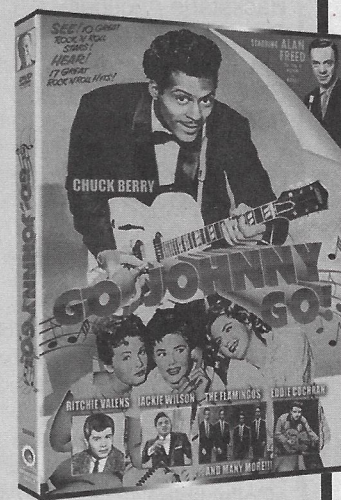
Perpetual Obscurity/Thirty Tigers (CD, LP)

Genre: Gospel
After years of recording his Americana songs, Thorn turns to his native South’s

black community’s thrilling gospel he heard in his youth – gutsy soul, R&B, even juke joint blues. Like Sister Rosetta Tharpe and The Staple Singers before him, he makes gospel rock with fervor.

GUS SPENOS
IT'S LOVIN'
I GUARANTEE
Self-Release (CD)

Genre: Blues/R&B/Swing
A neurologist in Indianapolis by day, Spenos turns retro singer and sax man romping with good-time songs from his own pen alongside classics from the likes of Professor Longhair and The Dominoes. The head doc’s disc’s press notes say it will “thrill your auditory cortexes.” Far out, man.



CHUCK BERRY,
ALAN FREED,
JIMMY CLANTON
AND OTHERS
GO, JOHNNY GO!

Sprocket Vault (DVD)

Genre: Musical
This charmingly innocent 1959 love story/musical also includes Eddie Cochran, Ritchie Valens, Jackie Wilson and The Flamingos. With both treasure and trivia, it’s a realistic snapshot of the era’s songs.