

Reviews

Chris Robinson Brotherhood

Big Moon Ritual RED



Let's get one thing out of the way first: **Chris Robinson Brotherhood** does not include **Chris Robinson's** brother.

Robinson's relationship with his Black Crowes bandmate Rich is notoriously prickly, so it's hard not to think that Chris' new band name holds deeper meaning. But it's a shame to focus on sour family dynamics when *Big Moon Ritual* is so damn funky. The Black Crowes have grown from hard rock icons to bluesy jam stars and *Big Moon Ritual* is Robinson's next logical step—a full immersion into Southern psychedelics, nine-minute song swoops, extended grooves and wailing vocals. Robinson may have assembled an ace new band (including Ryan Adams guitarist **Neal Casal**), but *Big Moon Ritual* is Robinson's baby. He celebrates his idols (The Allmans, The Dead, CCR and Zeppelin abound) and showcases himself—his vocals lead the charge, and Casal's guitar daydreams replace his brother's heavy riffing. It's a record informed by the road: vast seas of soulful jamming and Robinson's free-flowing vocals come together now and then for a blowout chorus. We'd never hope that Robinson's Brotherhood would replace his brother, but is there a world where they can coexist? That'd be Southern rock bliss. **Justin Jacobs**

Neil Young and Crazy Horse

Americana REPRISE



No one can predict where **Neil Young's** restless muse will lead him, but when he finds himself filled with bile

and indignation, **Crazy Horse** does come to mind. On his first studio release with his chaos-loving compatriots since 2003, he's made an album that recalls the tetchy rage and frenzied deconstruction of 1990's *Ragged Glory*, albeit with darker subject matter. While *Glory* looked back at an imagined past, *Americana* plunges deeper into our more brutal history, re-animating traditional songs—some as old as 300 years—stained by murder, accidental death and joblessness to point out that social brutality was as much a part of life then as it is now. These are anxious songs for still-anxious times, but instead of being as obvious as he was on 2006's *Living With War*, he decided on a more passive-aggressive—but not less heroic—approach to becoming a rakish prophet turning schoolroom classics like “Oh Susannah” and

“Clementine” into loutish garage rock to get his warnings across. **Jaan Uhelszki**

New Riders of the Purple Sage

17 Pine Avenue WOODSTOCK



Birthed (as they say) because Jerry Garcia wanted an outlet to play pedal steel, **David Nelson** and John

“Marmaduke” Dawson probably would've started a band anyway, and the **New Riders of the Purple Sage** have galloped onward for most of the past four decades. **Buddy Cage** replaced Garcia in '72 and Marmaduke died in 2009, but semi-unretired Grateful Dead lyricist **Robert Hunter**—who penned seven songs with Nelson, steeped in the same Bay Area folkwaters as Garcia and Hunter themselves—is onboard for this incarnation. The glorious centerpiece is “Suite at the Mission,” ringing like a lost Garcia/Hunter number cut from the same existential cloth as “Wharf Rat,” “Mission in the Rain” and countless others, weary and triumphantly defiant. Cage's pedal steel lays a tearful bed for Nelson's craggy delivery; Hunter's familiar world opens up instantly. In somewhat looser form elsewhere (like the F-bombed “No Time”), Hunter and the New Riders exude boogie wisdom of the “U.S. Blues.” The non-Hunter tunes aren't nearly as elegant, but that's not their fault, and it's a welcome dispatch from Hunter and the New Riders' American West as sunset approaches.

Jesse Jarnow

Willie Nelson

Heroes LEGACY



Only **Willie Nelson** could sing “Roll me up and smoke me when I die” and have the idea seem, well,

actually plausible. The country music legend and admitted pot smoker would probably give off a pretty good buzz. *Heroes* offers a good buzz too, featuring a handful of guests including **Ray Price**, **Kris Kristofferson**, **Merle Haggard**, **Snoop Dogg** (on “Roll Me Up...” of course), **Sheryl Crow** and sons **Micah** and **Lukas Nelson**. With this mix of new songs and classic renditions, Nelson weaves a warm and relaxed path through country's forms, touching on swing, Tex-Mex, classic heartbreak, twangy soul and honky-tonk. At 79, his voice sounds stronger than it has in years, especially on the reaching “The Sound of Your Memory.” His guests accentuate his grace and stature, but never cover for him. With music this good, hopefully we won't be smoking Nelson anytime soon. **Glenn Burns**

M. Ward



Norah Jones

Little Broken Hearts BLUE NOTE/EMI



Bad for her, good for us: **Norah Jones** has always made her most moving music when singing naked songs of

loss, and if *Little Broken Hearts*' title isn't enough of a clue, then perhaps the urgency in the lyrics of “Happy Pills” makes it more obvious: “Trying to pick up the pace/ Trying to make it so I never see your face again,” she sings, and she sounds like she means it. With **Danger Mouse** handling the production, co-writing and instrumental parts, *Little Broken Hearts*—Jones' fifth solo album—bears an edginess that, except for a few non-starters, is miles away from the cozy, jazz-informed balladry of the singer/songwriter's earliest work. Think of *Little Broken Hearts* as Norah Jones' update of Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks*. **Jeff Tamarkin**

Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros

Here COMMUNITY MUSIC/VAGRANT



Edward Sharpe came out of nowhere in 2007 (well, bandleader **Alex Ebert** came from the band Ima Robot) and

quickly conquered festivals and TVs everywhere with the smash hit “Home.” Cynics were quick to shy away from the hokey, happy hippie vibe, while those less jaded flocked to the quasi-messianic figure. Four years after the debut, Sharpe and his Magnetic Zeros return with *Here*, an album full of undeniable folk-rock hooks, gospel overtones, infectious lyrics, orchestral swells and a whole lot of love. It's the kind of stuff that makes you want to throw your arms around a stranger and sing-along, even if you hate that kind of thing. You can boil the album down to first song “Man on Fire,” where Ebert sings, “I want the whole damn world to come dance with me.” This band is about bringing people together, and isn't that what music is really all

about? Ebert made this cynic a believer. **Aaron Kayce**

M. Ward

A Wasteland Companion

MERGE/BELLA UNION



With his gravelly, sweet buzz of a voice blooming over rich, Americana melodies, **M. Ward** ambles his

way through *A Wasteland Companion*, his seventh solo release and an immediate contender for one of his best. Recorded in eight different studios from Portland Ore., to Bristol England in nomadic bursts, and with an eclectic range of 18 musicians, this song collection embraces Ward's lush fingerpicked arrangements and adds orchestral strings and plenty of sass. **Zooey Deschanel**, his part-time partner in She & Him, contributes her pop clarity to a few songs such as “Me and My Shadow.” Ward's music still embodies lo-fi, rustic textures with acoustic guitar, but he has broadened his range with rollicking saloon piano in “Primitive Girl.” “The First Time I Ran Away” showcases Ward's best features: his voice's gruff vulnerability, lyrical poignancy and his unerring, harmonious instincts. **Greg Gaster**

ALO

Sounds Like This BRUSHFIRE



On their fourth release, California's **ALO** does what it does best, which, ironically, is never doing the same thing twice. *Sounds Like This* finds the deliriously inventive funk-meets-all-of-the-above outfit abandoning familiar shores for an exciting swerve through their collective stream of consciousness. Songs deliberately written and recorded in the moment distill studio conventions and capture the band's legendary live show energy. The net result is an album brimming with expansive imagination and natural vibe. Improvisational spontaneity ignites everything from winding tunes of starry-eyed songwriters (“Blev-