

## HIT LIST REVIEWS

Winter,” along with Stephens’ distinctive finger vibrato.

The cover of “Sleepwalk” is a tad fusiony, but Stephens’ “Magnificent Seven” medley summons Duane Eddy, as does “Wild Blue Mavericks,” complete with growling sax. Most of all, Stephens’ playing is supremely melodic, best showcased on his beautiful reading of Skeeter Davis’ 1963 country crossover hit, “End Of The World.”

Welcome back, Leigh; your amp’s been on Standby. – **Dan Forte**



### Maragold Maragold

Rock-fusion guitarist Greg Howe takes a break from odd-time signature funk to form an ensemble rock band with vocals. Maragold consists of drummer Gianluca Palmieri, vocalist Meghan Krauss, and bassist Kevin Vecchione.

Maragold is a tight collaborative with vulnerable “tough chick” vocals and Howe’s superb-melodic athleticism. Krauss’ vocals are strong and seductive, never playing second fiddle to Howe’s guitar, yet never competing. “Paradigm Tsunami,” “Cry,” “Oracle,” and “Story’s End” display a seamless compositional integration of guitar and vocals.

*Maragold* is Howe at his most “Stratty,” milking some of his finest guitar tones from the “in-between” positions of his pickup selector. While the band creates inspired concepts and cliché-free riffs, the songs lack the mind-numbing hooks necessary for contemporary pop radio success. Good for music fans, not so good for mainstream success.

The production is pristine, clear, and refreshing, foregoing the trend of creating an album that sounds like it was recorded in 1972. The rhythm section of Palmieri and Vecchione grooves heavily without rubbing it in your face, which establishes a sincere ensemble feel. Maragold rocks mightily without being abrasive, bringing together great ideas with huge talent. – **OJ**



### Commander Cody & his Modern Day Airmen

Live from the Island

Talk about your timeless bands and timeless records! The latest from George Frayne IV – better known as Commander



## SUBLIME BLUES

**R**onnie Earl isn’t lauded nearly enough when the conversation turns to great R&B artists who are recording today. There are various reasons for this. Earl’s had his health issues and doesn’t make the rounds like many players do. But as his latest release shows, there are few guitarists who can unleash both the technique and emotion Earl captures in his playing.

From start to finish, this live recording shows a guitarman of exquisite taste whose playing is thoughtful while still reaching the heart and soul.

“The Big Train” opens the album, a shuffle with volume swells in the intro that reflect the title of the song. The solos jab and

hit while Earl’s comping under Dave Limina’s organ solo make sure the tune swings throughout.

Earl is also a versatile



### Ronnie Earl & the Broadcasters

Just For Today

player and no one-trick pony. The slow grind of “Blues For Celie” is a lesson on how to build solos. It clocks in at over nine minutes, but is never boring. He proves he can work several notes over in myriad ways to

draw everything out of them possible.

His cover of John Coltrane’s “Equinox” is a moody minor-key jazz/blues that lets his quick right hand add to the flavor of his soloing. “Pastorade” is a thoughtful, almost jazzy piece, heavy on major 7th chords and some sublime riffs from Earl. He’s not afraid to get in your face on occasion either. “Robert Nighthawk Stomp” is just what the title says, driven by Earl’s boogie-heavy solo. “Rush Hour” is a brassy shuffle with Earl turning it up and wailing.

While the majority of the songs are written by Earl and the band, there are some covers that could easily fall into cliché land, but given the skill of the players here, they are both joys. “Ain’t Nobody’s Business” builds beautifully to a blistering solo before settling back into some more tasty Earl guitar playing. Diane Blue joins the band for the only vocal on “I’d Rather Go Blind.” It’s a soul trip with gorgeous fills and volume swells that open the solo and lead to some more stylish guitar work.

The tour de force here is Earl’s original, “Blues For Hubert Sumlin,” a slow blues that shows the value of dynamics. His soloing dominates the epic piece, highlighted by jazzy references.

Not surprisingly, the songs here come from three venues in Massachusetts, close to home for Earl. The crowds and the band obviously are fond of each other, spurring both on. Guitar-music lovers will have the same reaction. – **John Heidt**

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Cody – and company could date from pretty much any era of rock and roll history. And that does not mean it sounds dated. This is hot music any way you look at it.

While the Commander plays his normal boogie-woogie piano and sings, the guitar duties are handled by Mark Emerick, who shines on every cut. Whether it's a classic like "Riot In Cell Block #9" with Emerick's big-toned rock and roll solo or the country stomp of "River City" (which Emerick also sings), his playing is dead on. He doesn't copy past Cody guitarists, but brings a different perspective to the familiar songs.

Speaking of former guitarists, Bill Kirchen joins the band on "Too Much Fun" and helps lead it to that junction of rock, jazz, and country in which this band excels.

Frayne's never been a great singer, but he knows how to perform his songs with a panache that his fans demand. Those same fans will be happy to know his sense of humor remains intact, as several song intros prove. Good to hear a veteran who still has his A game on. –

**John Heidt**



### Niacin Krush

The idea of an instrumental trio with only bass, drums, and B3 might be a bit odd, but the sonic origins of Niacin can be traced back to Jack McDuff, Jimmy McGriff, and Jimmy Smith. Niacin stars organ man John Novello (Manhattan Transfer, Ramsey Lewis), drummer Dennis Chambers (Parliament-Funkadelic, Santana), and bassist Billy Sheehan (David Lee Roth, Mr. Big).

*Krush* is Niacin's sixth studio album. Incorporating a funky fusion of rock, jazz, and progressive rock, the ensemble is a musical juggernaut with top-tier chops, musicality, and cool tunes.

"Stormy Sunday" mixes interplanetary prog with jazz to great affect as Chambers' drumming grounds the band in a mesmerizing groove throughout. Novello is the lynchpin of this outfit, providing rich harmonic content and stylistic range, particularly on "Prelude & Funky Opus," and "Electrocity" with its lush piano.

Sheehan brings the muscle, providing support and movement without distraction, and his soloing is ridiculously awesome, particularly on "Car Crash Red" and "Sly Voltage." Niacin is an ensemble of team players that creates a refreshing sound. *Krush* continues the band's forward momentum with imagination, skill, and power. – **OJ VG**



## BLUES-FUELED FUNK WITH AN ACCENT

For her sixth studio album, Serbian guitarist Ana Popovic travels to Memphis, where she appropriates the sound of contemporary African-American smooth funk. The result is a slick blues-based album of fiery guitar and the best singing of her career.

*Can You Stand the Heat* attempts to join the stylistic bullet points of virtuosic Memphis funk, blues, blues-rock guitar, and the sound of a young, attractive Eastern European woman (with an accent) attempting to sing and stage rap like a fifty-five-year-old Black woman from Chicago's South Side.

The set was produced by B.B. King drummer Tony Coleman, Grammy award winner Tommy Sims, and Popovic. The stars of the record are the crack team of fierce session stalwarts that

drive the righteous grooves. With Harold Smith (B.B. King All Star Band) on rhythm guitar, John Williams (Al Green) on bass, the



### Ana Popovic Can You Stand the Heat

Bo-Keys (Hustle And Flow soundtrack) on horns, and Coleman on drums, the funk is relentless.

Aside from the funk, Popovic brings the blues by nicely covering Albert King's classic "Can't You See What You're Doing To Me" with a tip of the hat to Albert Collins and the shuffle "Hot Southern Night" with the super legit

Lucky Peterson. Popovic shuts up the guitar critics on the instrumental "Ana's Shuffle." It's a show-stopping dirty guitar workout full of searing blues-rock licks, barking wah-wah, and the club crowd favorite stuff. It's on "Blues For Mrs. Pauline/Leave My Boy Alone" where she effectively channels SRV on guitar, but fails at the sassy sista' stage rap. It's painful.

The remainder of the record is full on funk, with a badass, in-the-pocket rhythm section doing what they do best. If the title track doesn't get your foot tapping, you're dead inside. The smooth R&B of "Mo' Better Love," the Robert Palmer-penned "Every Kind Of People," and to a lesser extent "Leave Well Enough Alone," is where Popovic begins to stretch beyond the blues influences that brought her success. She strives to be a legitimate vocalist, instead of the typical weak singer who can't wait to get to the guitar solo. For the most part she is successful, even with her slight Eastern Euro twang, but fails to rise to the soulful authenticity of a Shemekia Copeland.

*Can You Stand the Heat* is a stylistic mix of compositions that loses points for consistency but offers a little bit of something for everybody. It's a funk-based record with blues aspirations, smooth R&B brush strokes, gritty blues-rock guitar, and the opportunity for Popovic to demonstrate that her singing has evolved to the next level. – **Oscar Jordan**