

LAU

Live

Compass/Reveal 7 4479 2 (2008)

This recording was made live at the Bongo Club in Edinburgh, and the double-spread photo of the audience that appears in the center of the CD booklet is evidence of Lau's ability to mesmerize a crowd. All of the bodies, save two, are turned toward the stage, the concertgoers' attention intently fixed on what transpires onstage. The two exceptions are a young woman with eyes closed, apparently turning the listening experience inward, no less attentive, and one man looking distractedly toward the photographer, facing the camera with a semi-accusing stare; insinuating "How dare you intrude?" And if a picture is worth a thousand words, that photo says it all. Lau's music is so dense and rich, it often sucks whatever space exists between your neural synapses and insistently *demand*s your concentrated attention. At its very best, the music of Lau is fast and furious, with rhythms that turn on a dime. Listening to Lau's hard-driving and energetic music is no less engrossing than picking at a tangled chain.

The members of Lau each have established careers as ensemble players in other groups, and it's fortunate for us that they met up and decided to pursue this sideline together. Aidan O'Rourke, of Blazin' Fiddles, continues to blaze in such pieces as "An Tobar" (part of the "Frank and Flo's" set), though "Gallow Hill" and "Alyth's" show that he's just as capable and captivating while playing sweet, slow airs. Accordionist Martin Green, who grew up in the south of England

and has collaborated with Eliza Carthy, brings a particular genius for accents that are unexpected and sharp contrasts that border (but never quite reach) a garish note. In "Last Week's Efforts" (part of the "Stewart's" set), the music devolves into a carefully structured chaos that never quite spins out of control, though you'd swear it's going to. Kris Drever, a singer/songwriter/guitarist and sometime sideman to Cathie Ryan, Kate Rusby, and John McCusker, among others, offers modern interpretations that set traditional words to new musical compositions ("The Unquiet Grave," "Butcher Boy"). Thank heavens for these songs, which offer breathing space and occasional respite for the collapsed synapses to re-expand. All the music on this recording is composed by the band members.

Lau was named the "best group" at the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards 2008. On its MySpace page, the group describes itself as "folk/experimental." It might more aptly be described as traditional music from some other planet.

— Susan Hartman (Baltimore, MD)

RICHIE HAVENS

Nobody Left to Crown

Verve Forecast VERR01596-2 (2008)

Richie Havens has remained a potent voice for justice and freedom since his folk club days in the early 1960s and his new studio CD, his 27th release, is also a return to his original label, the now-revived Verve Forecast. *Nobody Left to Crown* is a musical commentary on the current socio-political landscape that blends Havens originals, including the title song and "Say It Isn't So," with covers, such as Andy

Fairweather Low's commentary on materialism, "Standing on the Water," and Peter Yarrow's timeless "The Great Mandala (The Wheel of Life)." One of the disc's high points is a stripped-down version of Pete Townsend's disturbingly timely cautionary tale "Won't Get Fooled Again" that lyrically complements Havens' own ironic composition "Say It Isn't So," which alludes to the similarities between

the situations in Vietnam and Iraq. Another inspired cover is a stark version of Jackson Browne's "Lives in the Balance" that features some memorable Eastern modal electric guitar from Derek Trucks.

Havens' own songs retain the jazzy edge of his early material with memorable melodies and passionate poetry that stand in sharp contrast to much of the "Ooh Baby" verbiage that often passes as lyrics today. Havens is backed by a small, mostly acoustic ensemble, but the focus is on his trademark rapid-strummed acoustic guitar and his distinctive voice, which may be softer around the edges than it was in the 1960s but has grown in eloquence and nuance. *Nobody Left to Crown* is a passionate work that shows Richie Havens to be a performer and composer at the the height of his powers, still making music that matters when many of his peers have either retired or are content to play their old hits on nostalgia tours.

— Michael Parrish (San Jose, CA)

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Chris Barber Presents the Blues

Legacy Lost & Found Series

Volumes 1, 2, 3

Blues Legacy 5067X, 5068X, 5069X (2008)

THE BIG CHRIS BARBER BAND

As We Like It

MVD Visual DVD5064X (2008), DVD

These three CDs of rare and previously unreleased live recordings of major American blues performers, like Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Louis Jordan, Sonny Boy Williamson, Howlin' Wolf, Hubert Sumlin, Jimmy Witherspoon, and Muddy Waters, jamming with British jazz giant Chris Barber in the late 50s and early 60s gives some clue to just what the Rolling Stones, Beatles, the Yardbirds, the Animals, Fleetwood Mac, the Who, and other major British Invasion bands were listening to in their early and formative years. Songs like "Pontiac Blues," "Dust My Broom," "Everyday I Have the Blues," "Hoochie Coochie Man," "I Can't Be Satisfied," and dozens of others on these three CDs inspired countless Brit skiffle groups to move into an edgier blues groove. Barber was an important figure in advocating the legitimacy of this music and in booking these legendary blues artists for tours and performances all over the United

Kingdom and Europe. The sound quality is superb, and all three CDs were recorded at the Manchester Free Trade Hall (site of Dylan's famous "Judas" moment) or at the National Jazz and Blues Festival in Richmond.

And if you like early jazz and Dixieland, chances are you'll enjoy the Big Chris Barber Band *As We Like It* DVD, which was recorded in 2007 in front of a studio audience at Shepperton Film Studios in England. Chris Barber is front and center, and his 11-piece band performs such classics as "It Takes a Worried Man," "Bourbon Street Parade," "Rent Party Blues," and "Jubilee Stomp." Andy Fairweather Low, Barber's special guest, sits in on "When the Saints Go Marching In" as a special bonus.

— T.J. McGrath (Woodbridge, CT)



Joan Baez - ring around the rose

JOAN BAEZ

Day After Tomorrow

Razor & Tie RTADV830022 (2008)

On 1995's live concert recording, *Ring Them Bells*, Joan Baez surrounded herself with artists (Mary Chapin Carpenter, Janis Ian, Indigo Girls, among others) who embraced her talent and provided a comfortable setting for Baez to render her own material, as well as cover some genuine folk classics. On her first studio album in five years there is a somewhat similar scenario, as she has chosen the appropriate work of others, and each piece seems to wrap itself around her silky soprano, caressing it and nestling within, instead of the other way around. *Day After Tomorrow* veritably shines due to Steve Earle's fine production skills. There is an immediately obvious gentle flow to the song selection and placement. Eliza Gilkyson's traditional-sounding "Rose of Sharon" lovingly yields to Elvis Costello and T Bone Burnett's Celtic-tinged



Lau - the planet spins out of control