

# Overlooked and Worthwhile

W

HILE MOST PEOPLE know about the top releases of 2015, even if they don't know the music (everyone is familiar with Adele), there were a good number of outstanding CDs released by newcomers and more established artists that were overlooked, but worth searching for. With artists' own websites and a slew of music sites as well as YouTube offering free streaming, not to mention iTunes and Amazon, I'd recommend that you tear yourself away from cat videos, Huffington Post and Facebook to listen to these albums. I've included my personal Top 10, but could have easily turned you on to twice that many great new CDs.

## Asleep at the Wheel Still the King

Celebrating the Music of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys

This is the CD I keep coming back to the most throughout the year. It could be because it's just so much damn fun. Swing music is very infectious and no one does it better than Asleep at the

Wheel. Ray Benson and the band have been keeping the Western Swing variety popularized by Bob Wills during the 1930s & 40s alive and well, if not more fun than ever.

The collection includes classic songs performed by the country music outlaws Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard; Nashville stars George Strait and Brad Paisley; and Americana icons Lyle Lovett and Buddy Miller; as well as songs by lesser known younger stars such as Old Crow Medicine Show, Amos Lee, Kat Edmondson, Pokey LaFarge, and the Avett Brothers, among others.

This is 'feel-good' music, where the shuffle of rhythm & blues meets the bluegrass jig at the honky tonk. And this album is where nostalgia becomes new again – standards from a bygone era revisited by artists both young and old. No matter your musical preferences, I dare you to listen to this CD and not have a smile on your face and toes tapping.

## Nils Lofgren

UK 2015 Face the Music Tour

Before there was a Bruce Springsteen there was a Nils Lofgren. When Miami Steve went on hiatus from the E Street Band, it was Nils that The Boss chose to fill that big void. Springsteen was a fan of his gui-

by Andrew Elias

tar playing in Neil Young's band (Nils was 19 at the time), the trio Grin, and as a solo artist as well as his exquisite songwriting. Like Springsteen, Nils writes about everyday people and their everyday lives, creating characters navigating between despair and hope through the American landscape.

An excellent live recording, it finds Lofgren performing a career-spanning repertoire – songs from his days with Grin, his early solo career and newer tunes. There is little banter between songs, but just enough to give you a real concert experience. His introduction to his song for Clarence Clemons, 'Miss You 'C' is very touching. But it is songs with titles like 'Lost a Number,' 'I Don't Wanna Talk About It,' 'The Sun Hasn't Set,' and 'Mud In Your Eye,' and 'Like Rain' will be the tracks that any Springsteen fan – and anyone else, for that matter, will be impressed with.

## Melody Gardot Currency of Man

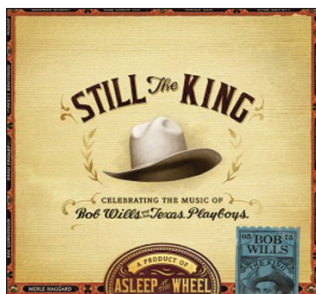
Melody Gardot is as fine a jazz singer as any of her peers. Her backstory is interesting. As a teenager she played piano in Philadelphia bars, but was hit by a car and seriously injured and hospitalized for extended periods. Music was prescribed as therapy for her recovery and while in the hospital she learned how to play guitar and began writing songs, which became her debut release. Four excellent albums followed including this powerful CD.

Sexy, soulful and smooth, *Currency of Man* finds Gardot experimenting with new rhythms and instrumentation. Songs like 'Don't Talk,' 'She Don't Know,' 'Same to You' and 'Preacherman' showcase her talents at writing and singing seductive and catchy songs. This is bluesy, jazzy, funky cabaret music at its best.

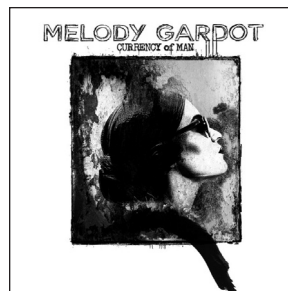
## Sam Outlaw Angeleno

The debut album from the southern-Californian singer-songwriter, *Angeleno* was produced by the legendary Ry Cooder. With a voice reminiscent of a young

Dwight Yoakam, Outlaw explores a similar soundscape, with elements of the 1960s Bakersfield sound (Buck Owen,



Asleep at the Wheel continues to keep the traditions of western swing music alive.



Sam Outlaw and Daniel Romano channel the spirits of George Jones and Gram Parsons



Merle Haggard) and 1970s Laurel Canyon (JD Souther, Jackson Browne). It's country music with a twist of California.

Songs like 'I'm Not Jealous,' with lines like *I'm not jealous of him, I'm embarrassed for you*, and 'Jesus Take the Wheel (and Drive Me to a Bar),' with lines like, *I'm gonna do some drinkin' / You should probably steer / I'm counting on you Jesus / Take the wheel*, and 'It Might Kill Me,' with lines like, *If it don't kill me it just makes you better / It might kill me, it might*, sound like they can be classic country laments by George Jones or Webb Pierce – or even Gram Parsons.

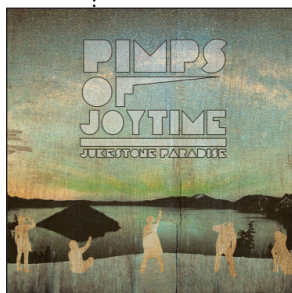
An impressive debut from a guy with the voice, the songs and the name to be a big country star.



*I do, what can I do / To get back to your heart / I would swim the Mississippi River / If you would give me another start*, in the 'Better Man' it feels like the natural evolution from 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough.'

The album delivers on the promise of the single, ten strong songs that vary from finger-poppin' ('Better Man' & 'Twistin' & Groovin') to danceable ('Smooth Sailin' and 'Flowers') to gospel ('Shine' and 'River').

### Pimps of Joytime Jukestone Paradise



This could be the party album of the year. This is hard funk, down and dirty blues with more than a touch of that tasty New Orleans sound. And they are not afraid to rock

out. Howling horns and wailing guitars mix with soulful harmonies and frenetic rhythm for a psychedelic gumbo that's impossible to resist. Imagine Parliament Funkadelic with Tom Morello at the Mardi Gras. A relentless collection of sweaty and sweet dance music made just for the fun of it.

From what I hear, the CD, as good as it is, doesn't come close to how good the band is performing live. Play loud and party!

### Daniel Romano If I've Only One Time Asking

Another new face on the country scene worth hearing, Romano writes sad country songs and sings them with all his heart. He has the knack for writing songs that sound like they've been classic for decades, yet they sound modern. If you're a fan of George Jones or George Strait, Ray Price or Randy Travis, the Flying Burrito Brothers or the New Riders of the Purple Sage, you will enjoy this album.

The opening track sets the standard with the lines, *I get more happiness from a bottle / And more love from a stranger*, and the songs that follow do not disappoint. This is rootsy country music, not the CMT kind. Songs like 'The One That Got Away,' 'Learning to Do Without Me' and 'If You Go Your Way (I'll Go Blind)' are enjoyed best when you're feeling blue and nursing a beer.

### Leon Bridges Coming Home

More than a few bands have been riding the retro train these days with even fewer successful at becoming more than a tribute to their influences. Leon Bridges is not one of those artists. His sound, although obviously owing a lot to Sam Cooke and Marvin Gaye, sounds as refreshing as the originals. The horn arrangements, backing harmonies and lyrics all sound familiar – like early Motown, Stax and doo wop. When Bridges sings, *What can*



Let It Trouble Your Mind' and the title track highlight the breadth of her emotional artistry.

### Caitlin Canty Reckless Skyline

Listening to this album I was reminded of the first times I heard Sheryl Crow, Bonnie Raitt, Lucinda Williams and Gillian Welch, but all the while knowing that this was an impressive new talent very much her own woman. In songs ranging from folk ballads to country blues, Canty displays a gift for intelligent and sensitive songwriting, as well as possessing a lovely, sweet voice. Highlights are 'Enough About Hard Times,' 'My Love For You Will Not Fade,' and 'My Baby Don't Care.'

Only her third album, *Reckless Skyline* makes it clear that Canty is destined to be one of the leading female voices on the Americana music scene.

### Kinky Friedman The Loneliest Man I Ever Met

It's pretty amazing that after 40 years, Kinky Friedman, at age 70, would release what could be his best album ever. His voice, despite a life of hard drinking and cigar smoking, this Jewish Cowboy, has never sounded better. And the songs here, from the title track, a song he had written decades ago but never recorded, to covers of songs by Merle Haggard, Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, Tom Waits, and Warren Zevon, expose a side heretofore mostly unknown – a Kinky with a melancholy and nostalgic longing for a time passed.



### Rhiannon Giddens Tomorrow Is My Turn

The solo album by founder of the Grammy winning Carolina Chocolate Drops is an eye opener. As singer, violinist and banjo player for the band, she seems to have only scratched the surface of what her talents can offer. A virtuosic musician, it is her vocals that explode off this CD.

Producer T Bone has compiled a collection of songs by some of America's greatest women-folk singers. Rhiannon does them proud and can stand with the best of them as an equal.

While songs like 'Waterboy' and 'Round the Mountain' showcase the extent of her vocal acrobatics, songs like her version of Patsy Cline's 'She's Got You,' Dolly Parton's 'Don't



Unfortunately, there were many more outstanding CDs released in 2015 – Amy Helm's *Didn't It Rain*, Liz Vice's *There's a Light*, Sam Lewis' *Waiting on You*, Dave Alvin & Phil Alvin's *Lost Time*, The Honeycutters' *Me Oh My*, and Son Little's debut – to name a few. And that doesn't include all the great jazz CDs of 2015. I will review the best new jazz CDs in the March/April issue. •