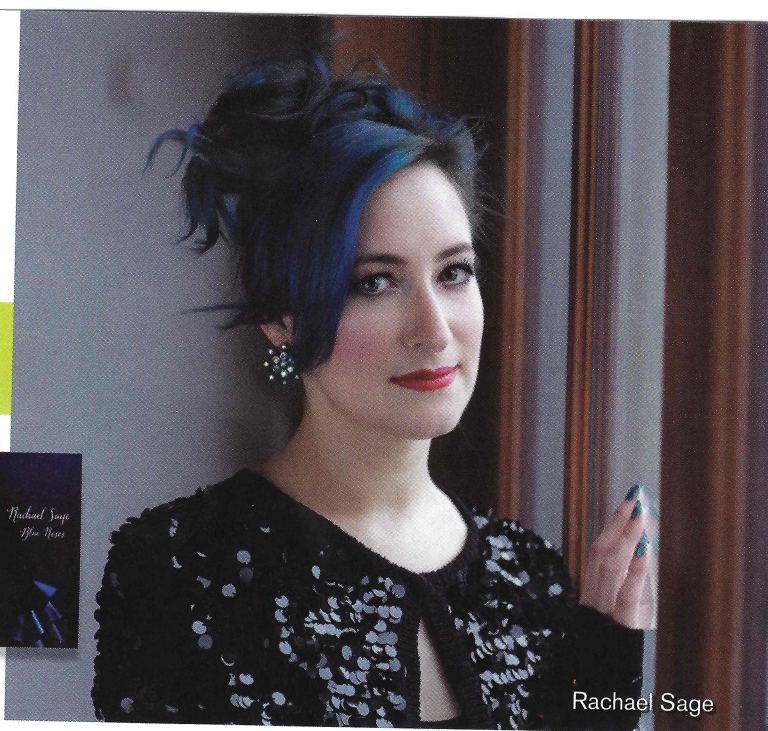
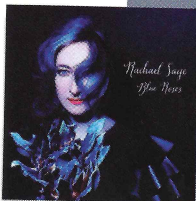


RACHAEL SAGE

Blue Roses

rachelsage.com

As she sings on "Wax," Rachael Sage must have been absent on whatever day she was supposed to have learned a valuable lesson about love: "If you break one heart, it'll boomerang back." There's lots of breaking and repairing of said organ on this New York City singer, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, former ballet dancer, and label head's 11th album. Amid all the emotional fluctuations, there are, thankfully, some constants: Sage's unobvious word choices (e.g., "You're tea and I'm English"), her crisp piano and guitar chords, and the way she weaves mournful violin and other instruments into pretty chamber-pop songs that never feel cluttered, musically or lyrically. On "Skywriting," she tells a lover, "We were meant for mystery," which might be her way of saying they were meant for each other. Whatever sadness and



Rachael Sage

confusion she feels on tracks like that one, "Barbed Wire" and "Misery's Grace" disappears on "Happiness (Maddie's Song):" "I've waited my whole life for a chance to become hopeful," Sage sings, just before a lovely violin solo with accents of trumpet. A lifetime is a long time to wait. At least it wasn't in vain.



LION'S MOUTH
Lion's Mouth
lionsmouthband.com

The final song on this L.A.-by-way-of-Wisconsin duo's debut is called "Coming Home," and oddly, it's an instrumental. It follows forthright, unambiguous rockers like "Distance" and "Run"—odes to putting serious mileage between oneself and the pain of the past. Singer and guitarist Chelsea Z. certainly has the moxie of hard-edged wanderer, but the sweetness in her voice makes the idea of an album-ending homecoming seem somehow right. It also gives Lion's Mouth's '90s-style grunge-pop a touch of lightness often lacking in guitar bands with this much musical firepower at their fingertips. On the standout "Soulmates," Chelsea and drummer Sara Wexler contemplate everlasting love, and as their hearts swell, the music is right there with them.



LOW SOCIETY
You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down
screaminblues.com

Of all the blues-rock bands in the land, only this one owns the domain screaminblues.com—and man, do they own it. Slide guitarist Sturgis Nikides attacks the fasties like the rock 'n' roller he is, while firecracker frontwoman Mandy Lemons lives to straddle bucking grooves and ride 'em for all they're worth. "Crammed & Jammed," "You Got a Right," and

"Should've Known Better" are no-brainers: full-tilt blues cruisers everyone can get behind. "Up in Your Grave" throws country and rockabilly into the fray. Low Society could wail away forever, but on the crawling "Need Yer Love," Lemons wins with subtlety, recasting "I Put a Spell on You" as a yearning love song. It still sounds pretty badass, though.



STEPHEN DOSTER
Arizona
stephendoster.com

Three decades ago, this singer-songwriter nearly made an album with James Honeyman-Scott. Sadly, the Pretenders guitarist died before they could finish the sessions, and that set Doster down a path toward producing and writing for others artists. He's done well for himself—his credits range from Willie Nelson to Squeeze—but on this, his fourth and most fully realized LP, he hints at what might have been. Doster is a thoughtful lyricist and storyteller who can weave fine melodies through poppy rock songs informed by folk and country. He adds trumpet and sax on "Enough for Everyone," a jazzy little number about how the world gives us everything we need. Here's a guy who'd know.



SAUCE BOSS
100% Pure
sauceboss.com

Were he just a one-man band—a kooky swamp-blues sage playing sick slide guitar

and working the drums with his feet—Bill "Sauce Boss" Wharton would be a true American original. Live, he sweetens, or rather spices, the deal with gumbo he cooks onstage and distributes after his gigs. Yeah, he's got a couple of gimmicks working for him, but his songwriting and musicianship are no joke. On his latest, Wharton wigs out on tunes ranging from silly ("Marquis de Swamp") and sweet ("Cadillac of a Woman") to actually kind of serious ("Chicago Combat Zone"). Even without the food, he satisfies with ladlefuls of personality.



HIDDEN IN THE SUN
Seven Seasons
hiddeninthesun.com

Lizzie Clapper couldn't have picked up her strange mojo at San Jose State University, where she studied music education. She's got a crooked jazz croon and bewitching poetic sense that must be inborn, and thanks to guitarist Sean Alexander and keyboardist Ciara McAllister—both amazingly versatile players—she's got freedom to roam wherever the mood takes her. On songs like "Coat of Armour," "Roulette," and the title cut, this San Francisco quintet comes on like a typical Americana band and then changes course, veering off into hard rock, piano balladry, and whatever permutations of folk and blues lie in between. You can't teach this stuff, but for the sake of future bands, here's hoping Clapper tries.