

FILTER ALBUMS



The Shins' James Mercer, still bad at meeting people?

“Douche-baggery has always pissed me off.”

James Mercer talks to James McNair.

What events and influences fed into *Heartworms*?

“Everything I’ve experienced. The art I’ve seen. The real life shit. Loving and hating a lot of this world. Having a family. The usual things, I guess. I’ve also been really loving Ariel Pink’s stuff lately and his attitude. [It] gave me inspiration to be brave and take risks.”

Is a heartworm some kind of significant event that lodges in the heart?

“That’s kinda the idea. I wanted a word to describe what it feels like to love someone who doesn’t love you back. It’s like you’re infected with some sort of emotional disease. Then I remembered the ‘90s band Heartworms and it made me nostalgic. It all made sense somehow.”

You’ve said *Name For You* is a call for female empowerment inspired by your three daughters...

“I don’t want women in general to have to put up with frat-boy bullshit. I think I’m more sensitive to the issues because of my family life, but douche-baggery has always pissed me off. I think everyone should own their own sexuality and not be reliant on the society around them for some sort of approval.”

Do you fear for your daughters in a Trump-led America?

“No more than anybody else’s.”

Mildenhall documents your time living at an RAF base in England aged 15, and in Ramstein, Germany. As an American kid passing through, was it tough to make friends?

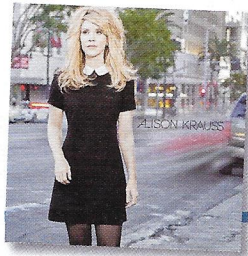
“I think I was especially bad at meeting people. The first year I moved to England I really didn’t hang out with anybody outside of school hours. But it also meant time spent alone listening to records and singing along in my room.”

That song mentions a kid in school passing you a Jesus And Mary Chain tape. Which one?

“*Psychocandy*. It sounded absolutely bizarre to me. But slowly the songs revealed themselves. They were just pop songs dressed up in hip threads and dark glasses.”

Half A Million sounds as though it’s channelling early Cars or Split Enz. What is it about?

“I really wanted it to sound like a Cars song. It’s about the pressures that we all feel I think nowadays to be many different things at once. I especially like the line directed at a girl when the character says: ‘A virgin in the moonlight, a freak on the scene.’”



Alison Krauss

★★★★

Windy City

DECCA/CAPITOL. CD/DL

Grammy award-winning ‘voice of country’ raids the classics songbook.

After 2007’s *Raising Sand*, her inspired pairing with Robert Plant, Alison Krauss returned to more familiar territory and her usual backing group Union Station for 2011’s *Paper Airplanes*. *Windy City* was produced by Nashville studio guru Buddy Cannon, and contains 10 classic songs by Willie Nelson and Glen Campbell among others; some deliberately chosen from before Krauss was born. These measured readings of Gentle On My Mind, Brenda Lee’s Losing You and Nelson’s I Never Cared For You stay faithful to the originals, while a lively take on Poison Love, made popular by bluegrass kingpin Bill Monroe, is a welcome change of pace after back-to-back ballads. Truthfully, Krauss’s voice could bring gravitas and emotion to the Southern Rail timetable, and *Windy City* is a rather safe album. That said, any number of modern country vocalists would probably kill to sound this safe – and this good.

Mark Blake

Laura Marling

★★★★

Semper Femina

MORE ALARMING/KOBALT. CD/DL/LP

Largely written on her US tour in support of 2015’s *Short Movie*.



Billed as an acute exploration of femininity/female relationships, Laura Marling’s

sixth album takes its name – which translates as “always a woman” – from Virgil’s *The Aeneid*, part of which the Berkshire-born singer-songwriter has tattooed on her leg. Big on strings, picked acoustic guitars and vintage-sounding electric guitar tones, the record’s nine songs are exquisitely performed, while rising producer *de nos jours* Blake Mills (Alabama Shakes; Jim James) shines again, conjuring snare sounds like horses breathing (Wildfire), and making a bass-guitar-led texture-fest of Soothing, the album’s sultry, early Kate Bush-like opener. In the dense press release accompanying *Semper Femina*, Marling asserts the work grew out of “a masculine

time” in her life, and some might find the work’s almost wilful-seeming opacity and slight whiff of academia off-putting. Judged on purely musical terms, however, it’s a thing of great beauty.

James McNair

Rhiannon Giddens

★★★★

Freedom Highway

NONESUCH. CD/DL/LP

Powerful second solo disc from former Carolina Chocolate Drop.



Giddens fades in her cover of The Staple Singers’ Freedom Highway, a clever

acknowledgement that this music of resistance has been playing for decades. But her storytelling sweeps back much further than the Civil Rights Movement. At The Purchaser’s Option balances on a clause that allowed masters to buy or refuse their slaves’ newborn babies. Julie and Come Love Come are originals set during the American Civil War. But then Better Get It Right The First Time drops the listener right back in the present, playing like a Curtis Mayfield take on #BlackLivesMatter. Giddens plies soul, R&B and hip-hop as easily as she does old-time music, blues, gospel and jazz. The cohesion across settings and styles is a testament to both her characters’ resilience and the skills of Giddens and co-producer Dirk Powell. A vital album for an anxious era.

Chris Nelson

Spiral Stairs

★★★★

Doris & The Daggers

DOMINO. CD/DL/LP

Scott Kannberg’s fourth post-Pavement album hits the mark.



Guitarist Scott Kannberg, AKA Spiral Stairs, always was Pavement’s spiritual conscience, and he’s struggled to establish a creative identity outside that legendary band. But following 2009’s *The Real*

Feel, Kannberg relocated to Brisbane, and the Antipodean air clearly infused his work with a fresh perspective. With violin splashing through its strum, AWM has a laconic Go-Betweens sensibility, while Dundee Man is a pan-hemispheric conceptual coup: a Scottish travelogue styled after the efflorescent Dunedin peal of The Chills. Recorded back home in California with help from psych-pop magus Kelley Stoltz, the bittersweet jangles suit Kannberg’s lugubrious croon, peaking amid the yearning Angel Eyes, an emotional tribute to Kannberg’s friend Darius Minwalla, the Posies/Hugh Cornwell/Spiral Stairs drummer who died just before recording began: “We’ve all got angel eyes, in the end.” It’s been a long journey, but Spiral Stairs has finally found his voice.

Keith Cameron

The Residents

★★★★

The Ghost Of Hope

CHERRY RED/MVD. CD/DL/LP

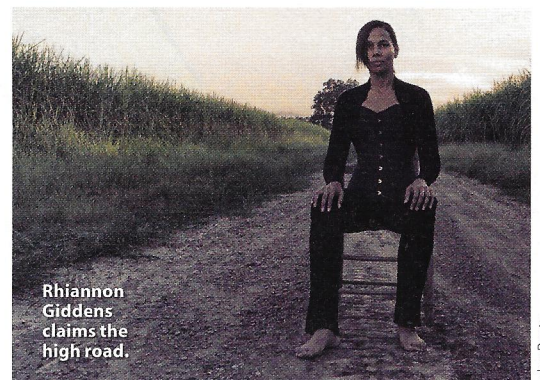
Always crashing in different trains – a short musical history of rail disasters.



Through lyrics based on contemporary newspaper accounts, mainly from

late 19th century USA, all spoken and sung in a folksy kind of way, these are songs describing a time when technology was progressing faster than society could regulate or control. Instrumental passages, locomotive rhythms and all manner of sound effects are used to colour in these morbidly compelling stories. These include a tale of a circus train of performers and animals destroyed – with the jovial sound of calliopes and steam organs; and a family who’d been out picking strawberries near the railway line hit by a locomotive. The group examine these incidents in a matter of fact way and the neutral, world weary singing creates a peculiar poignancy within the archness. The stand out is Elephant Vs Train, based on an incident in Malaya in 1894, an instrumental punctuated by pachydermal trumpeting.

Mike Barnes



Rhiannon Giddens claims the high road.

John Peets