



The Ninetree Stumblers

A total of ten Clifton Chenier cuts document his versatile sound. From playing blues, boogie-woogie, fashionable dance tunes and pop songs, elements of country and western swing as well as two-steps and waltzes, he carved a style and earned a popularity that eclipsed any other Zydeco artist for two whole decades.

The collection ends with a glance back at its roots with Canray Fontenot and Bois-Sec Ardoin taking us home with some classic rural creole waltzes and blues.

Anyone looking for a better introduction to black creole music in SW Louisiana, or indeed a reminder of the scope and variety of this music should look no further than this. An absolute joy.

www.fremeaux.com

Jack Tyldesley

THE NINETREE STUMBLERS

Complete Recorded Works In Chronological Order (Vol 1) Nanny State Records NSCD-4001

Back in 1927, the Victor Talking Machine Company brought a field unit to Bristol, Tennessee, to record musicians from the region including Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family. Fast forward to 2015 and Bristol UK and here's The Ninetree Stumblers, a group "born a hundred years late and 4,000 miles too far East," in thrall to the sounds of "the old, weird America".

Ruth Gordon, Liam Kirby and Daniel Weltman are all versatile and skilled, effortlessly swapping instruments and tearing it up on guitar, fiddle, mandolin and banjo, with occasional harmonica, bass and percussion. *Soldier's Joy* aside, they eschew the over-familiar in favour of more obscure gems like *Old Hen Cackle*, *Ladies' Quadrille* and *Uncle Ned's Waltz*, sourced from the magnificently-monikered likes of The Happy Hayseeds, Hoyt Ming And His Pep Steppers, Gid Tanner And The Skillet Lickers and the North Carolina Hawaiians.

Individually, their vocals aren't quite in the same league as the instrumental chops, but when they harmonise, as on *Fatal Wreck Of The Bus*, they sound more than fine.

There's a lovely self-deprecating and knowing humour about this release, exemplified by the title and cover design, which accurately and affectionately pastiche the venerable Document Records house style. A lot of

British groups play early American music, but The Ninetree Stumblers stand out from their more run-of-the-mill contemporaries, not only for their impressive mastery of the musical form, but their understanding and feel for the function of it. This music just isn't designed for a hushed concert performance, but to dance, drink and have a laugh with your mates to. Listening to this album will make you want to do all of that, just as going to one of their gigs will make you want to buy this album.

And also check out *The Ninetree Stumblers Radio Hour* podcast, issued monthly via Mixcloud, iTunes, etc.

www.ninetreestumblers.co.uk

Steve Hunt

SHANTEL

Viva Diaspora Essay B00U6SW5HM

The Balkan beat boss is back with a bang. Germany's Stefan Hantel aka Shantel burst onto the international scene a decade ago with an unapologetically crowd-pleasing blend of Balkan, electro disco and Caribbean influences, which got right up the hooters of purists and provided the rest of us with hours of thumping goodtime fun. Subsequent releases have been somewhat hit and miss and it looked very much as though Shantel was a man of the moment whose moment had passed. But now we have *Viva Diaspora*, billed in some quarters as his "Greek album" and there is certainly an East Med influence (both Greek and Turkish) here, bolstered by the involvement of trad Greek singer Areti Ketime (on the excellent *Eastwest-Dysi Ki Anatoli*) and Athens' kindred spirit dance-floor genre blenders Imam Baildi.

But that's only part of the story. There are Balkan-flavoured pop tunes, Latin American influences and a pair of pumped up versions of Jamaican reggae classics (The Ethiopians' *The Whip* and Max Romeo's *Chase The Devil*, re-titled *Disko Devil*).

On paper this all sounds like a directionless mess. Yet the album is one of the most coherent thought through and consistent I've encountered recently. There's brains behind these beats. Blessed with an all pervading spirit of carnivalesque playfulness and lightness of rhythmic touch. It sounds as though Shantel's back in the hot seat and enjoying himself again, to a highly infectious degree.

www.essayrecordings.com

Jamie Renton

THE OLD FASHIONED

Strawberry Leaves No Masters NMCD45

Here is a new trio who have decades of experience with top folk bands playing a lovely varied selection of songs and tunes.

The three are Fi Fraser, Pete Bullock and Howard Mitchell and they bring a welcome freshness and delight to their performances on this superbly recorded production.

Fi does all the singing, usually to piano and double bass accompaniment and her voice comes over with a youthful sparkle; she sounds as though she really enjoys all these songs whether she is interpreting well known items from the English repertoire such as *Our Captain Cried All Hands*, *William Taylor* and *The Bonny Labouring Boy*, humorous items like Jack Lane's *The Rest Of The Day* or the gem from Derek Pearce, *Reversible Fleece* or that ode to an aging dance queen, *Stately As A Galleon*.

Pete Bullock's career as a pianist has seen him play in widely varying situations with jazz as well as folk outfits as well as stage shows including the National Theatre. He adds cheeky fills to the funny items but brings an entirely different and appropriate accompaniment to songs of women in tragic circumstances such as *Poor Murdered Woman* and Jez Lowe's very moving *The Last Of The Widows*.

Fi's career has, of course, included playing with three of England's top folk dance bands and there are opportunities to hear just what a fine fiddle player she is. On some of the dance tune tracks, Howard Mitchell switches from bass to melodeon and his composition, *Jack's Seven Handed Reel* is the most interesting and engaging of the instrumentals heard here.

www.nomasters.co.uk

Vic Smith

PEARLY CLOUDS

Pearly Clouds Trapeze Music TRACD6514

Gary Lucas has only been nominated for a Grammy, been named as one of the 100 greatest guitarists on the planet, collaborated with Jeff Buckley (and co-penned Buckley's greatest song), performed and composed with Nick Cave and Patti Smith, paid musical homage to Herzog and Tarr, and been a member of the Beefheart Magic Band.

And he only plans to release three albums this year.

Comprehending the man's picking, plucking, plans and back catalogue is a breathtaking undertaking. But most impressive is the unrelenting quality of his many projects. This album, an exquisitely unreal Hungarian heartland of the New York imagination, is no exception.

He has joined up with the naturally ethereal and yet tradition-centred vocals of Enikő Szabó and the endlessly experimental jazz stylings of saxophonist Tóni Dezső, to produce a record of spiritual longing and timeless musical expansiveness. It is possible that many will be offended by the deceptive simplicity of the task and the many liberties taken. Others will be transported.

These are traditional songs – from Kalotaszeg, in particular – that every Hungarian singer seems to have attempted at least once. This accruing of interpretations is chipped away at here, and replaced with mystery, placing Dezső's saxophones in a multi-layered world of his own invention. Throughout, Dezső replicates a hot Hungarian folk ensemble and a contemporary prog rock band with apparent unlimited licence. His contributions are eerie and unearthly, narrative-shaping improvisations or an extended

shimmer of fragile life against a big sky. The electronica is primal and sharp, and Lucas's ideas are substantial around the damaged purity of the vocals. And the songs, so often heard in more reverent settings, suggest a kind of geographical séance, still holy, for the rural Hungary I know and its severe but strangely beautiful landscape. Bindweed blowing through the small village ennui.

There has been hopeful talk of live dates in the UK. Last August they premièred much of this material at Budapest's famously sweltering and dusty Sziget festival, at one o'clock in the morning. One cannot imagine a fitter place or time in which to experience this big music than during a witching hour in the heat of a Central European high summer on a dusty island in the middle of a Danube in disguise.

www.acrobatmusic.net

John Pheby

RUNRIG

The Story Ridge RR078

There's no way this could fail to be an emotional, spiritual album, for if there is one band who are steeped in the yesterdays, todays and tomorrows of their land, it is Runrig. After four decades of highly-charged atmosphere, huge soundscapes, intrinsic rock and an attitude which made for a healthy individuality, they've decided to bring down the curtain, at least as far as the studio is concerned. There will be gigs in the future but this is their recorded farewell. To be short, it's everything they are and that's brilliant. *The Story* is their story.

The title track opens, an instant classic, there's a poignant whisper of a vocal from Rory McDonald, a catch in his voice and a circling guitar line, a man lost in yesterday longing for and dreaming of his youth in the Hebrides. The band reaches a mellow midpoint when all hell gloriously breaks free, a pounding dance track underscores Iain Bayne's thundering drums and Malcolm Jones soars a lead guitar break over valley and glen. It's mighty.

Naturally there is much inward contemplation and not only in the writing; keyboard player Brian Hurren's stepped up to the mark as producer, even gamely integrating the 32-piece Prague Symphony Orchestra with superb effect. Capturing the sounds the McDonald bothers intended perfectly, he moves from heartbreaking tenderness to full-on Gaelic storm. The sureness of his instincts are proved by a reflection on the all-night gatherings of the embryonic Runrig Dance Band, *The Place Where The Rivers Run*, accordeon to the fore and a deep reeling under-melody and shouts of glee, "we'll turn this village hall into a city full of lights", then the philosophy "home by Kyle and Broadford, round by Memphis, Tennessee". That's Runrig musically as well as inspirationally, the track is pure celebration. Likewise *Every Beating Heart*, a gorgeous, rolling, acoustic thing, passing generations, full of equal shots of sentiment and determination.

Special mention though has to go to *Somewhere* – perhaps the most enlightening and emotive track they've tackled since the days of *Recovery* and *The Old Boys* – recorded as honour to Dr Laurel Clark who perished aboard the shuttle Columbia as it broke up re-entering the earth's atmosphere in 2003. She'd played Runrig throughout her time aboard, her family even presented her *The Cutter & The Clan* CD rescued from the shuttle debris to the band. Their answer is deeply moving, a rolling sweep of strings and spirituality. Quietly, as the track fades, there's a brief snatch of Laurel Clark chatting from beyond the Earth, static and she's gone. The stillness and silence which follows weighs heavy. They've crafted a truly evocative closing. It's worth the price of the album alone.

Swapping between Gaelic and English within the same song attests that Runrig long ago achieved their principal goal of giving their native tongue and their heritage a place in contemporary culture.

Runrig's *Story* is a tale well told and indisputably worth hearing.
www.runrig.co.uk

Simon Jones

SIERRA HULL

Weighted Mind Rounder Records 11661-9166-2

Sierra Hull is a mandolin virtuoso and former child prodigy who signed to Rounder Records when she was just thirteen-years-old. This, her first new album in five years, is produced by Béla Fleck and features harmony vocals from Rhiannon Giddens, Alison Krauss and Abigail Washburn. Reading those simple facts, one might well be anticipating an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink extravaganza of an album. This is something very different and very much better than that.

Weighted Mind is a sparsely accompanied record. Fleck supplies banjo on *Queen Of Hearts/Royal Tea* and *Black River* but otherwise the instrumentation consists of Hull's own mandolin and octave mandolin, supported throughout by the supple bass playing of Ethan Jodziewicz.

Lyrical (as one might expect from the title) it's intensely personal. Hull has clearly exorcised some demons in those five silent years, producing a body of unflinchingly plain-spoken songs in the process. There's a killer line in almost every song – "if love was unconditional... well it ain't no more" (*Birthday*), "I'm tired of trying to be someone else" (*Choices And Changes*), "I can't chase away my doubt" (*Weighted Mind*) and "I don't think that I can bear much more pain..." (*I'll Be Fine*).

More than just heartbreak songs, Hull's lyrics explore and affirm her knowledge of who she is – an artist defined but no longer constrained by her particular gift. Despite her instrumentation and pedigree, this isn't a bluegrass record, nor (radio-friendly melodic hooks notwithstanding) is it a 'cross-over' or a pop album. It's just Sierra Hull making the best, most honest music she can, and that's more than good enough.

www.sierrahull.com

Steve Hunt

Sierra Hull



BLUE ROSE CODE

...And Lo! The Bird Is On The Wing!
Ronachan Songs RSCD0003

Each new album put forward by Blue Rose Code is a sequel in an intensely personal narrative, an episodic story perpetually unfolding, populated with real, recurring characters. Ruptured romances you had once been emotionally invested in. Old enemies that rear their heads. Familiar neighbourhoods previously called home, since forsaken. New terrains to navigate. It takes bravery to lay the soul bare as Ross Wilson does, albeit veiled beneath musical moniker Blue Rose Code. Intimate they may be, these candid lyrics are also perilously universal; *And Lo!* is the third in a saga of records that will awaken every existential fear, every bygone bruise, every buried parcel of emotion you thought you had tucked safely to bed.

In spite of expansive themes, from the retrospective to the prospective, in a way the songs are all pieces of the same jigsaw, a visceral exploration of steady lyrical motifs. His first album, *North Ten*, included wedding proposals and love songs: "If I asked you for your hand tonight... I would sing this to our children". Now, in the most heartrending and arresting track on the new album, the stark *Pokesdown Waltz*, Ross confronts the disintegration of this same marriage, but tenderly promises to always sing those old love songs: "they're yours and they're mine". True to his word, he revisits his former single, *Love*, this time with a sombre, nigh funeralsque treatment. The premise of much of this music is catharsis, clemency and reconciliation.

This third album takes a noticeably jazzier direction than its predecessors, brass and keys stepping up next to Ross's rolling guitar and Danny Thompson's bass. The gospel velour of The McCrary Sisters brings exhilaration to tracks like *Grateful* and *My Heart, My Sun*, while the honeyed clarity of American singer Wrenne provides a foil to Ross's own coarse, colloquial vocal. Even Ewan McGregor makes a cameo appearance. Sonically challenging, the music regularly unfurls into euphoric disarray. Although still plagued by the shadow of old addictions and mortal fears, there is optimism and contentment beginning to win out in these raw songs.

Until the next instalment, with bated breath.

www.bluerosecode.com

Kitty Macfarlane