

Tom Geddie's 25 favorite Texas-related CDs of 2011

THE BEST MUSIC CRITICISM — I CERTAINLY don't always or even often reach that level — or any arts criticism is just a simple, honest response to what it makes you feel when you hear or see it. It's more of a subjective than objective thing. Sure, there are all kinds of technical things that go into making good music, but the gut response is legitimate praise.

Here are the favorite 25 Texas-related CDs I heard during 2011. I know there are probably at least that many more really fine ones out there, but if I haven't heard them I can't put them on the list. Read this list. Notice how few of these CDs come from major labels. Buy and listen to these people's music.

Various Artists *This One's For Him: A Tribute to Guy Clark* Music Road Records

GREAT SONGS PERFORMED with genuine feeling. Rodney Crowell, Lyle Lovett, Joe Ely, Shawn Colvin, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Emmylou Harris with John Prine, Patty Griffin, Ron Sexsmith, Rosanne Cash, Steve Earle, Vince Gill, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Terri Hendrix, and others — 30 songs by 33 of Clark's friends and colleagues. Hendrix: "Guy Clark is like a dancer with the way he talks and a photographer with the way he writes."



Danny Schmidt *Man of Many Moons* Red House Records

DANNY SCHMIDT SHARES ten of his own songs on this stripped-down collection and covers one Bob Dylan song, 1974's "Buckets of Rain." Schmidt called making his "stark and naked record" something like what happens "when a private person decides, for the sake of art, to venture out downtown, naked." A central theme, he wrote, revolves around the process of making peace with Commitment; the capital C is his.

Sarah Jarosz *Follow Me Down* Sugar Hill

SHE'S 19. FOCUSED. CURIOUS in the best sense. Support on this one from Shawn Colvin, Casey Driessen, Stuart Duncan, Seamus Egan, Bela Fleck, Vince Gill, Viktor Krauss, John Leventhal, Kenny Malone, Edgar Meyer, Darrell Scott, and Dan Tyminski.

Nine of her own songs including an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's last, haunting poem "Annabelle Lee" plus interpretations of Bob Dylan's "Ring Them Bells" and Radiohead's "The Tourist."

Nathan Hamilton *Beauty Wit and Speed* Ironduist Music

NATHAN HAMILTON IS ONE of our best roots songwriters in both roots and rock, so the opening song was a bit surprising: the short, sorta piano classical, mood-setting "A Red Thread Runs" followed by 10 more original songs ranging from roots to near-pop — in the best sense of that word "pop." Hamilton packs a lot into these songs.

Eliza Gilkyson *Roses at the End of Time* Red House Records

ELIZA GILKYSON HAS SOME fun with slide trombone, percussion, and more on her new CD, which is mostly serious: "what kind of beast comes Slouching Towards Bethlehem" and "he's comin' in the name of hunger / draggin' all the poor folks under." She haunts with "Belle of the Ball," which recounts memories of her mother: "I thought you were dead you said that's not the case / but it's a kind of a wall / and then you faded you faded away / the fairest of all, I begged you to stay."

Tom Russell *Mesabi* Shout!Factory

TOM RUSSELL IS ONE OF OUR more literate songwriters and is a dramatic performer of these short stories in three- and five-minute, sometimes sentimental and sometimes simply existential songs. The only cover is an 8:54-minute, brooding interpretation of Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall" with Lucinda Williams and Calexico.

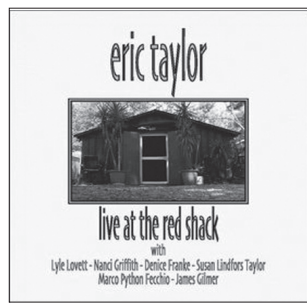
Gurf Morlix *Blaze Foley's 113th Wet Dream* Rootball Records

BLAZE FOLEY'S SONGS REMAIN almost as interesting as Foley himself was, and Morlix fulfills a longtime dream in sharing 15 of the iconic Austin writer's songs. Morlix does a fine job, not sounding just like Foley but being true enough to the music that it's easy to clearly hear Foley in all of the songs. Morlix did all the

vocals and played all of the instruments except Rick Richards added drums on "Of Course" and Kimmie Rhodes sang some harmony on "If I Could Only Fly."

Eric Taylor *Live at the Red Shack* Blue Ruby

CARVED FROM SIX AND A half hours of tape over two nights at the Houston recording studio with favored — "formidable," as he calls them in the liner notes — friends: Lyle Lovett, ex-wife Nanci Griffith, Denise Franke, and more. Filled with old, familiar songs in new versions and with at least one of his oldest songs that he never recorded before.



Amanda Shires *Carrying Lightning* Little Lambs Eat Ivy Music

HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDE "WHEN You Need a Train It Never Comes," a sad song about the aftermath of a relationship; the melancholy "Ghostbird;" "Love be a Bird;" "Kudzu," which is a love song rather than a condemnation of an invasive species. This is a thoughtful and consistently good folk, pop, bit of country and gypsy collection of a dozen original songs with an accumulation of poetic turns of phrase, well performed.

Slaid Cleaves *Sorrow & Smoke: Live at The Horseshoe Lounge* Music Road Records

MOST OF HIS BEST STUFF is here, including "Horseshoe Lounge," of course, "Drinkin' Days," "No Angel Knows," "Broke Down," "Cry," "Lydia," "Breakfast in Hell," "Horses," "One Good Year," etc. — the songs that he jokes took him from "total obscurity" to "relative obscurity."

John David Kent *John David Kent* Roustabout Records

THIS MIX OF ROCK AND bluesy country is loaded up front with good songs that could also appeal to modern, mass country music audiences. The heart of the CD may be in the desire to come home, shared on tracks four and five: the vaguely gospel-sounding "Back to the Country," where he proclaims the need

for "a drink of water from a deeper well," and "Down to the Water," where he proclaims he was born a southern man with southern values.

Miranda Lambert *Four the Record* Sony

THERE ARE STILL TOUCHES of that rockin' country, proudly independent, belligerent "bad girl," but some combination of marriage, maturity, and perhaps label influence show up in some more gentle songs, too. The CD is a bit slicker, but not any better than her previous Sony releases. Lambert remains at the cutting edge of the new generation of country-hybrid stars.

Lincoln Durham *The Shovel (vs) the Howling Bones* self-released

RIGHT FROM THE OPENING percussion, most of the CD sounds quite a bit like something Ray Wylie Hubbard would do, which isn't surprising because Hubbard is a mentor to Durham, and co-produced with George Reiff. It's filled with ten greasy-sounding, throwback blues and one song that's basically clean and bright. Overall, it's consistently appealing because of the sound and the "feel" — whatever that is, we know it when we hear it — and lyrics that are both straight ahead and poetic but, unlike on a Hubbard CD, not always particularly fresh or even original. (It took Hubbard years to get where he is; Durham's still a promising young 'un.)

Various Artists *The Best of Times: Texas artists performing the music of Sara Hickman* Sleeveless Records

SOME OF THE STATE'S MOST well known musicians do their own takes on 36 of Hickman's songs; the current Texas State Musician produced the project to benefit Theatre Action Project. Performed by Christine Albert and Chris Gage, Marcia Ball, Edie Brickell and New Bohemians, The Flatlanders, Ruthie Foster, Robert Earl Keen, Jimmy LaFave, Rhett Miller, Patrice Pike, Trout Fishing in America, and others.

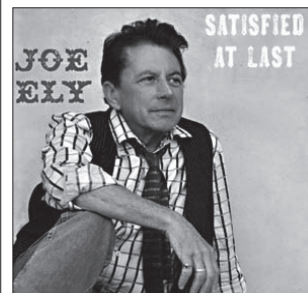
blacktopGYPSY *Whirlwind* Gypsy Publishing

MOSTLY A MIX OF LOVE AND lost love and even longing love songs, all well crafted and performed. The CD is mostly country but without much twang. The harmonies from lead singer Andie Kay Joyner and singer-fiddler Heather Starling are excellent on the 10 songs — seven of their own and three covers — that are all well played, as ex-

pected from this band and from semi-legendary Texas producer Lloyd Maines.

Joe Ely *Satisfied at Last* Rack 'Em Records

CONSISTENTLY GOOD WITH seven of his own songs, two by Flatlander buddy Butch Hancock, and his own respectful take on Billy Joe Shaver's "Live Forever." The CD is sort of a song cycle about life and mortality without being carried away by the concept.



Suzanna Choffel *Steady Eye Shaky Bow* Self-released

A BLEND OF WHAT SHE CALLS indie-soul-pop is as intriguing as it is eclectic. Among the 10 original songs here, at least two or three ought to be real hits that fit into somebody's genre. The Austin native's influences range from Erykah Badu to Edie Brickell and beyond, and she is a winner in the John Lennon Songwriting, International Songwriting, and FameCast competitions.

Robyn Ludwick *Out of These Blues* self-released

THE MUSIC RICOCHETS OFF country, folk, the blues, and other influences, and she's often compared to Lucinda Williams, to Emmylou Harris, and to Jackson Browne; the Williams comparison is most appropriate, and I hear some thankfully rural Carly Simon and, from time to time, even a bit of Mary Gauthier.

Whiskey Myers *Firewater* Wiggy Thump Records

FINE EXAMPLES OF COMBINING rock and country. Songs filled with country words and rock music: traditional notions mixed with a rock attitude, kinda like moonshine and gasoline.

Adam Hood *The Shape of Things* Carnival Recording Company

INDEPENDENT MUSIC IS where most — not all — of the good songs survive, no matter what those big national charts tell us. On "Hell of a Fight," Hood tells us, it's been a cold, cold winter and "I've run through my money in Nashville, and it's time to get on with my life."

Good. Some people — a lot — go to Nashville and do well in the corporate music world and on its fringes. Many go and leave, a little wiser, and find their own roads.

Slowtrain *Bound to Find You Out* self-released

THIS IS A CONSISTENTLY good but seldom great collection of nine songs, one of them twice, that also share a kind of joy in the music itself and in the approach. From the opening, Beatle-ish "Not the Only One" to the closing, alternate take of "Waiting Just for You," the sound is soulful and fine; the lyrics are sometimes just a little bit simple.

The Band of Heathens *Top Hat Crown & The Clapmaster's Son* BOH Records

SHADES OF BLUES AND country and even gospel that, at their best, remind of the masterful Delbert McClinton. The songs — from a band that can have fun and also be serious — deal with love, desire, and a bit of social justice.

Mark Jungers *More like a Good Dog than a Bad Cat* American Rural Records

CONSISTENTLY SATISFYING, close-to-the-earth singer-songwriter who plows reality with a finely honed sense of irony. He shares a somewhat existential rural outlook filled with hardships to overcome or not, conjuring cattle rustling, snowstorms, gambling everything on a single chance, and, yes, even a bit of man-woman love.

Deryl Dodd *Random as I Am* Smith Entertainment

DERYL DODD'S BEST OFFERING yet. He put together 13 good songs: some filled with toe-tapping energy and some slow ones that simmer with intensity. The subjects are more traditional than, in this case, clichéd because he treats them well: honky-tonks, a bit of macho begging, longing, love and lost love, a bit of wordplay, and nods to Texas music and to faith.

Brandon Rhyder *Live at Billy Bob's Texas* Smith Music Group

A CUT ABOVE SO MANY OF the so-called Texas country-rock acts because of a certain maturity in his approach; generally, an intensity beyond energy plus smoother vocals, more musical diversity, and fewer honkytonks and other clichés without abandoning the audience and without the audience abandoning the band. ■