

RECORD REVIEWS

Casey Donahew Band Double-Wide Dream Almost Country Records

Casey Donahew's NEW *Double-Wide Dream*, is indeed country despite his label's name: Almost Country Records. Closer to traditional country than much of what passes for country today. Is it a fair criticism to mention that, in the songs — as if there's a checklist of subjects and phrases to profit from while making fun of them.

Sure. Why not? "Not every song has to change your life," Donahew says. "There's got to be some entertainment in the world."

No doubt he does that, although there are some serious songs on the CD, too, often about the sad break-ups that are part of the lives of most of his audience and, truth be told, most people at one time or another. Some of the songs, such as "Regrets," are a little sonically cluttered, but radio seems to like them that way. *Double-Wide Dream* is Donahew's fourth CD, following 2009's *Moving On* which climbed into the top 30 on the Billboard Top Country Albums Chart.

When Donahew and his co-writers avoid the stereotypes, they put words together fairly well (from a country wordplay point of view). On "Give You a Ring," he sings of making a phone call to a lost but lingering love, not (yet, if ever) putting a ring on her finger: "it's been five years since you left, and we've both got our regrets, but it made me smile to hear you're back in town... take a chance, let those walls come crumbling down... I'll give you a ring so your eyes can't say no."

—TOM GEDDIE

The Little Willies For the Good Times Milking Bull Records

IT'S HARD TO NOT THINK OF **The Little Willies** as **Norah Jones** and four guys. For those of you who might not be familiar with the band, it's for real. It's serious music, despite the wordplay of the name and the group's ability to enjoy some of the classics and other songs here. There's even a **Willie Nelson** song, "Permanently Lonely," among the dozen.

Jones has never been strictly a jazz singer, as she was first marketed. She does that well, but she lends her distinctive voice to just about any genre. Each of her own CDs has seamlessly mixed other genres.

On *For the Good Times*, named for the **Kris Kristofferson** hit that's been covered by several people, The Little Willies have at least five songs — maybe more — that could be country hits again if the commercial stations would play them. Jones nails a straightforward version of the title song. Her versions of "Remember Me" and "Lovesick Blues" are excellent, too, filled with country soul.

"Foul Owl on the Prowl" is a fun, slinking duet about the title character, who's hungry for a chick; it's one of the few songs on the CD that's not truly country, but so what?

"Diesel Smoke, Dangerous Curves" sung mostly by Richard Julian, is country somewhere in the vicinity of what Junior Brown does.

Classic offerings include **Loretta Lynn's** "Fist City," **Dolly Parton's** haunting "Jolene," **Lefty Frizzell's** "If You've Got the Money I've Got the Time," and **Ralph Stanley's** "Worship You" with its odd stop-and-go nature in this interpretation.

The four guys are, **Julian** (acoustic guitar and a couple of vocals), **Jim Campilongo** (guitars), **Lee Alexander** (bass), and **Dan Riser** (drums). They're joined by a fifth guy, **Rob**

Moose, on strings on one song, and they all make meaningful contributions to this good, well-played CD.

—TOM GEDDIE

Gene Watson Best of the Best: 25 Greatest Hits Fourteen Carat Music

IF THERE'S NO HEARTBREAK LIKE country heartbreak, does that mean there is also no better love than country love? That might be the question for **Gene Watson's Best of the Best: 25 Greatest Hits** — newly sung songs exploring those themes (and a couple more) from his 50 years in the business. There's a lot of heartbreak — or at least old memories — in this mostly contemplative collection of songs that he made famous or semi-famous.

It's a consistently solid offering. The pensive back-cover photo of the aging Watson, with the sad eyes, and with the wrinkles that someone has called receipts for life, reminds that youthful broken hearts, no matter how real and tragic, cannot compare to the depth of the pain that lingers, mingled with the finest moments, through the years.

Watson still sings well. He's joined by **Sonny Garrish**, who played steel guitar during the original recording sessions, and a supporting cast that recreates the original arrangements with piano, fiddle, and more — even going so far as to listen to the original recordings — rather than going for new interpretations. The songs are often slow, sometimes upbeat. Most of them are thankfully free of the excessive, in-the-way background vocals that some studio people still think sound good.

Highlights this time include "Paper Rose," "Nothing Sure Looked Good in You," "You're Out Doing (What I'm Here Doing Without)," "Farewell Party," "(I've Got) Memories to Burn," and more.

On "The Old Man and His Horn," Watson recalls meeting a man who "plays on down in New Orleans in some old dingy dive," and tells stories about the good old days. But the old man wasn't really there anymore. That's not the case with Watson himself; he's definitely still with us.

—TOM GEDDIE

Booka & The Flaming Geckos The Not So Meaningful Songs in the Life of Jeremy Fink Loudhouse Texas Music Publishing

IT'S DIFFERENT. THAT'S THE FIRST thing I noticed about *The Not So Meaningful Songs in the Life of Jeremy Fink*, crafted — and nicely played — by **Booka & The Flaming Geckos**.

Booka is **Booka Michel**. He does percussion and piano, and he created the songs along with co-producer **Sam Seifert** for a movie — "Jeremy Fink and the Meaning of Life" — that apparently won some youth movie awards and went straight to, or nearly straight to, DVD. The 12-year-old title character and his best friend, **Lizzy**, search Manhattan for four keys that might help him find that meaning.

The eclectic music on the soundtrack — this is it — is, unexpectedly, a mix of Piedmont blues, Civil War-era sounds, bluegrass, folk, "acid western," and more.

The Flaming Geckos are **Cindy Cashdollar** (primarily pedal and lap steel), **Dennis Ludiker** (fiddle, mandolin), **Kenny Franklin** (guitar, bouzouki), and **Glenn Fukunaga** (electric bass) with extras from **Marcia Ball** (piano), **Spencer**

Jarman (electric guitar), **Matt Mefford** (double bass), and **Aaron Topielski** (upright bass).

Very few voices. The 14 songs are almost exclusively instrumental — one song includes vocals — ranging from the upbeat, fiddle-driven "Rubber Chicken Rag" to the somewhat-dread-filled stroll of "Sowetto Alley" to the contemplative "Mid Atlantic Sunrise."

—TOM GEDDIE

Emmeline Someone to Be Self-released

THESEVEN SONGSON **Emmeline's Someone to Be** are perhaps a bit uneven, but there are a couple of wistful gems. Overall, this is a nice, piano-and-percussion-driven, well sung alt-pop, sorta jazzy CD about love and wanting; she calls it pop music for smart people.

On the opening, Emmeline wants to let the memories fade and to drive until she's lost. In the middle is a short, original rap by **Sammy Blaze**.

"The two of us had been talking about a collaboration for quite some time, and we frequently discuss things like purpose, calling, and the importance of art as a form of motivation," she said. "As a result, when I wanted to add something to the song, I immediately thought of him."

On "Mine," she sings: "my pretty paper heart, it got used to the dark" and "I think I like you better when you're not here."

The Dallas-based Emmeline claims **Ani DiFranco**, **Billy Joel**, **Stroke 9**, **Matchbox Twenty**, **Mariah Carey** and **Ace of Base** among her influences, and makes the rounds of Absinthe, Balcony Club, Lakewood Bar & Grill, Liquid Lounge, Opening Bell, and other DFW-area venues.

—TOM GEDDIE

Shawn Nelson San Juan Street Fonky Tonk Music

Shawn Nelson's FOURTH CD, *San Juan Street*, comes out of a wide range of influences ranging from Tex-Mex to reggae to bluegrass delivered with a downright country voice and, on most of the songs, country instrumentation and playing. His influences, he says, include the brass bands of New Orleans, **Robert Earl Keen**, and **Guy Clark's** advice to study **Townes Van Zandt's** songwriting.

Nelson's rough-hewn voice is good enough to get by. He's skilled with lyrics, and had a stint as a corporate songwriter in Nashville. "Nobody Got A Hold On Me" is an upbeat, repetitive country-folk song about freedom.

The country-sounding, almost gospel "Dreams in the Desert" shares the notions that hope is on the highway but "promise and passion, faith in the fallen... you pray, you dream, you beg, you plead, but it don't change a thing."

Among the 14 songs, Nelson's nods to New Orleans on this one are "Hit the Road" and "Anna Lee," two sad, very human songs about the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina.

He delves into a kind of cosmic consciousness and in "Hollow Moon" and protests the rape of the land in "Babylon." Neither is the usual fare for country, whatever "usual" is these days; he strays from the clichés and stereotypes, which is a good thing.

Joel Guzman produced. The players are Nelson's band, **The Ramblers**, plus **Matt Slusher** on electric mandolin, **Will Dupuy** on upright bass, **Trisha Keefer** on fiddle, **Ephraim Owens** on trumpet, and a handful of other folks.

—TOM GEDDIE

AMERICANA TEXAS

By Tom Geddie

FORGET EVER TRYING TO BE A music star. Instead, if you're a real writer or musician, become the best writer or musician you can be. I've believed that for a long time. I've told several people that. Some of them look at me like I'm trying to crush their dreams. Some of those are people who just think they want to be famous; others are real artists who think there's a \$\$\$\$ future in corporate music.

For some, for a few, there is that future.

For most, signing a contract with a major label is like rolling dice. There's one possible chance of the dice coming up "star;" there are a couple or so chances of the dice coming up "career;" and there are at least eight possible chances of bitterness growing out of the dreams.

I don't mean to seem cynical. I mean to be realistic — without giving up that dream.

I mean it's best in almost every case to work very hard at your music, and to also work very hard at the business of your music if you want it to be a career instead of a hobby.

One hard-working model for career success is **Terri Hendrix**.

Early in her 20-or-so-year career, Hendrix talked with people at four labels who said they weren't interested in her music. Since then, she's pointed out several times that she's still in business and all four of those labels are not. She's released 14 CDs — folk-pop-jazz-blues, and other sounds — on her own Wilory Records label.

Every independent artist should have a copy of this hard-working Grammy winner's book, if for no other reason than its success story. The book is *Cry Till You Laugh: The Part That Ain't Art*, and the second, updated edition is now available. It's

a valuable guide for any musician who wants — or is forced to — pursue an independent career. The book — both quirky and good, like Hendrix — is filled with entertaining stories and practical business advice.

Hendrix and music partner **Lloyd Maines**, with diligent use of a long-cultivated mailing list, once paid a CD's production costs with advance orders a month before that CD was released — in April — regionally and two months before it was released nationally. That kind of following is impressive enough on its own. But the advance orders also paid for the CD's print and broadcast publicity, and for the duo's travel expenses for the rest of the year.

Financial pressures still exist, and always will, for independent artists, but years of hard work also build and maintain creative freedom.

Cry Till You Laugh is filled with sometimes random musings that can inspire creativity in any musician — pretty much any artist, I suppose — although from a practical viewpoint it's the business advice that maybe most useful to people — beginners or sputtering veterans — who want a career in music and are willing to put in the entrepreneurial effort. Chapter five — of a dozen — includes firsthand-knowledge sections about booking gigs (including a sample contract), music publishing and other legal issues, manufacturing and distributing, small-business marketing and publicity, and more.

Many of the chapter titles coincide with song titles on her same-title, excellent CD released in 2010.

Several share "Goat Notes" musings from recent years, road ramblings, funny and touching stories.

One, "Einstein's Brain," deals frankly with Hendrix' longtime com-

ing to terms with epilepsy. Others deal with remaining aware of and tuned in to the world around us. From both a human and artistic viewpoints, that's where our inspiration begins.

One, "The Part That Ain't Art," begins with a corny and meaningful quote — lots of corny and meaningful quotes and some that are simply meaningful are scattered through the book — of a joke that you may have heard before: "A pig and a chicken are walking down a road. The chicken looks at the pig and says, 'Hey, why don't we open a restaurant?' The pig looks back at the chicken and says, 'Good idea — what do you want to call it?' The chicken thinks about it and says, 'Why don't we call it Ham and Eggs?' 'I don't think so,' says the pig. 'I'd be committed but you'd only be involved.'"

Commitment rather than simple involvement is one key to success.

One chapter, "Whatachoice," is the title of a 30-second, off-the-wall snippet on the CD at a Whataburger drive-in window when Hendrix and Maines negotiate the advantages of including — and sharing — a cinnamon roll with their meals. (You can do put that quirky sort of thing on our CD if you're independent.)

In the book, that chapter begins, "Every single choice I made as an artist was one I hoped would enable me to continue to support myself making the type of music I wanted to create." That sort of focus and perseverance — mixed with obvious talent — work for Terri Hendrix; it can work for many artists who are willing to put in the meaningful time.

I recommend the book. I know that the cinnamon roll would be fine, too, but I know that the book — tasty in its own way — is much more nutritious. ■

Fri Feb 3.....Freddie Jones
Sat Feb 4.....Eric Lindell
Fri Feb 10.....Elvis T Busboy
Sat Feb 11.....Mike Morgan & Lee McBee
Fri Feb 17.....Jason Elmore & Hoodoo Witch
Sat Feb 18.....Mike Zito
Fri Feb 24.....Smokin Joe Kubek & Bnois King
Sat Feb 25.....Holland K Smith
Fri Mar 2.....Freddie Jones
Sat Mar 3....."Fired Up!"

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