



New CD is collection of 18 duets: Willie Nelson

Willie Nelson & Friends To All the Girls Legacy

IT'S TUESDAY, SO IT MUST BE time for another Willie Nelson album. And, however much that sounds snide, I don't think there's a one of them that I haven't appreciated.

The new one is *To All the Girls*, a collection of 18 duets with, what else, women. Not a girl in the group, although *Lily Meola* is only 18. I am not familiar with *Tina Rose*, who may be a young one, too, if her website is any indication. Her father is *Leon Russell*.

As slow and contemplative as so many of the performances are, I began to wonder, early on, if it would put me to sleep. Not that sleep is a bad thing, and not that all of the performances are slow. It seems fairly common these days for duets to slow down; I suppose that's because the singers are trying so hard to match each other's pace, although I don't even know if they were in the studio at the same time. On second listen, I like almost all of the songs.

Willie is, as always, Willie, and the songs — most of them familiar — are good. So, in this case, it's the duet partner who makes one performance stand out from another.

Among my favorite performances here are "Far Away Places" with *Sheryl Crow*, the very pretty "Always on My Mind" with *Carrie Underwood*, "No Mas Amor" with *Alison Krauss*, "Walkin'" with *Norah Jones*, "Till the End of the World" with *Shelby Lynne*, "Will You Remember Mine" with *Meola*, and "Have You Ever Seen the Rain" with his daughter *Paula Nelson*.

Other duet partners are *Dolly Parton*, *Miranda Lambert*, *The Secret Sisters*, *Roseanne Cash*, *Wynonna*, *Loretta Lynn*, *Melanie Cannon*, *Mavis Staples*, *Emmylou Harris*, and *Brandi Carlile*.

—TOM GEDDIE

Steve Howell Yes, I Believe I Will Out of the Past Music

ANYBODY WITH A HANKERING for old-style, mostly acoustic blues might give a listen to *Yes, I Believe I Will* by *Steve Howell* and *The Mighty Men*. It's a pleasant, listenable, mostly laidback collection of country blues with a touch of gospel.

Look at the pedigrees of the 10 songs: *Blind Willie Johnson's* "Keep Your Lamps Trimm'd and Burning" and the traditional "I Know You Rider," and "Rake and Rambling Blade" plus some somewhat newer — but still bewhiskered — songs.

There's also a take on *Willie Brown's* 1930 song "Future Blues"

and a nice version of *Danny Barnes's* much more recent "Wasted Mind."

Even the songs' messages are vintage. On the excellent "Walk on Boy," the 1960 hit by *Mel Tillis* and *Wayne Walker* that's become a *Doc Watson* staple, we know that we've got to carry our own load down the road. *Dock Boggs's* musically haunting "Country Blues" (also known as "Hustling Gamblers") shares the wisdom that once our pockets are empty, our friends are gone.

The most unexpected arrangement is *The Fleetwoods's* wistful 1959 hit "(I'm) Mr. Blue," which has also been recorded by

David Bromberg, *Garth Brooks*, and the *Classics IV*.

On his fourth album, Howell is joined by *Chris Michaels* (electric and acoustic guitars, bass), *Dave Hoffpauir* (drums), and *Jason Weinheimer* (keyboards). Howell adds acoustic guitar and vocals.

Howell, who won the 2012 "Historical Significance Award" from the Academy of Texas Music, shares an album for people who can sit on the back porch and listen — leisurely — to music, or sit on that porch and make music.

—TOM GEDDIE

Earl Poole Ball Pianography Self-released

Earl Poole Ball SPENT 20 years as the piano player in *Johnny Cash's* band. He played on *The Byrds's* influential *Sweethearts of the Rodeo* album and recorded with *The Flying Burrito Brothers*, *Merle Haggard*, *Wanda Jackson*, *Buck Owens*, *Gram Parsons*, *Jo-El Sonnier*, and many more. More recently, in addition to recording his own albums and performing with his own bands (plural), he's toured and recorded with *Heybale!* and *The Lucky Tomblin Band*.

Pianography, which includes seven new studio recordings, four live recordings from the 2010 "Johnny Cash Bash" tribute, and two older recordings, is a mix of old-school country and lively rockabilly.

The highlight, to my ears, is one of the 2010 recordings. He and *Lisa Mills* do a masterful duet on the Carter Family classic — and often recorded — "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." His salt-of-the-earth voice is down-home perfect for it; so is Mills' soaring voice.

Other highlights include the playful "Say You Love Me," the fun "Sing It Boy," the hardcore rockabilly "Mean Woman Blues," and the gospel-sounding "Flowers on Papa's Grave," which is the original version of a demo he did in 1977.

—TOM GEDDIE

Sam Baker Say Grace Self-released

A NEW *Sam Baker* ALBUM IS always a quiet treasure, it seems: simplicity of expression, depth of often intense meaning, and mostly simple and moody instrumentation except where more music helps the song.

The new one — his fourth studio album — is *Say Grace*. Once again, Baker semi-talks his way through the songs, finding something almost spiritual in each of them. To say grace, Baker said, is to say thank you.

"It means to be grateful for what is before us — for what we have. It means to not be bitter about what we don't have and, really, to not be bitter about things lost."

On the 14 songs — including two and a half beautiful instrumentals — he introduces us to a woman who starts every day just fine but wonders where the time went, remembers a hymn she never liked, and goes to sleep with the TV on; to a man who wants to comfort the tattooed woman in his bed as well as her husband would; and someone who wonders where has his love gone now that he's old and gray.

The message of grace on this new album follows the messages contained in each of his first three: we are all at each other's mercy, the marvel of being alive, and the art of forgiveness.

These are definitely songs to listen to, not to play in the background as another soundtrack to our own lives. Baker once said every word needs to be important, to be a critical part of the character or character development.

"I love all those guys who write so beautifully that they turn into a pillar of light and go up into the sky. My characters figure out how to pay their bills and do the best with their families and fall in love with the right and wrong people, and things happen and we move on to whatever happens next. Narrative moves, moves, moves, and it's always moving forward, always going. I try to make the tiniest slice of the narrative as it rolls over, turns, moves to wherever it's going. It's got to have enough flesh and tendons so that the story works and turns — the ideal balance of skin and muscle and tendons to go with the bones."

—TOM GEDDIE

John David Kent Before the Sun Comes Up Roustabout/ Black Land Records

HIGH EXPECTATIONS FROM A listener aren't necessarily fair to the musician as artist. We should form our opinions based on what the musician shares, rather than what we expect. That said, *John David Kent's Before the Sun Comes Up* is a good album, but a little more middle-of-the-road commercial than I was expecting.

Like his first solo album, it should sell very well with the Texas/Red Dirt and similar crowds that tend to go for familiar themes and words. It's mostly high-energy country-rock — fairly heavy on the rock — with lots of instruments, like radio prefers, filling up the quiet spaces.

Dwight Baker, who's worked with *Kelly Clarkson*, *David Archuleta*, *Bob Schneider*, and others, produced this one. *Before the Sun Comes Up* is Kent's second album of his own. His first, *JDK*, led to three top-20 singles on the Texas charts and a hit video on CMT's "Pure Country." When he was 16, Kent was part of the short-lived, youthful *Radish* phenom with friend *Ben Kweller* in the 1990s, touring the world and the TV talk show scene until that band fizzled during one of those major label top-management shakeups that have hurt too many musicians.

He introduces us to a young woman who parties hard at the honky-tonk, to the desire to drive free on the open road, to someone who's low on gas on the lost highway, people who hid in each other's arms, lookin' for a good time on a Friday night and fallin' in love, and the perils of being in love.

—TOM GEDDIE





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AMERICANA TEXAS

By Tom Geddie

Listen to almost any of the songs on *Kellye Gray's* new album and it is almost certain to sound like something you've never heard before. Until a phrase and then whole lines ring memory's bell. I don't particular like the album's title — actually, I don't like it at all — which plays off some people's stereotypes of what Texas, in their minds, is. But it's appropriate enough to enough people, I suppose, to sell a few extra copies: *And They Call Us Cowboys: The Texas Music Project*.

The songs are something else, though. Every one of them familiar to generations of fans of Texas songwriters: *Christopher Cross*, *Mac Davis*, *Kris Kristofferson*, *Lyle Lovett*, *Roger Miller*, *Shake Russell*, *Townes Van Zandt*, and hits by *Willie Nelson* and *Roy Orbison*.

It's cool to go back and listen to the original versions of these songs, then listen to Gray's versions. The newness she brings to these old songs through the jazz interpretations adds a level of thought, of gravity, when we think we already knew what treasures they offered. We always filter the songwriter's original meaning through our own experiences, then we filter another artist's interpretation of the original meaning through his or her own experiences. It's not as confusing as it might sound.

Every interpretation on the album is stands up well to the original versions, which says something good about both the songs and Gray.

The biggest surprise to me is *Davis's* "In the Ghetto" which *Elvis Presley* made into a hit. I didn't even know that this pseudo-soul song was written by a Texan, much less by the Lubbock songwriter. There's also a delightful version of *Miller's* comic country song "Dang Me."

The best versions to my ears, though, are the slow burners: *Kristofferson's* "Help Me Make It

Through The Night," *Van Zandt's* "If I Needed You," *Russell's* "Deep in the West," *Cross's* "Sailing," *Lovett's* "Night's Lullaby," a particularly haunting version of *Orbison's* "Only the Lonely," and *Nelson's* hit "Always on My Mind."

Gray — an Austin native with a long history in San Francisco — puts her own touches into the arrangements (with *Jake Langley*) and performances of all nine songs. She's got a near-perfect jazz voice: expressive, smooth, plenty of range, powerful enough, and well phrased. The songs were recorded live at *The Coop* in Austin with *Langley* (guitar), *Pamela York* and *Kevin Lovejoy* (keyboards), *Chris Maresh* (bass), *Kyle Thompson* (drums), *John Mills* (horns), *Red Young* (organ), and *Chris Lovejoy* (percussion).

One night quite a while back, I was at a sports bar in Plano for a birthday party. The manager had carelessly booked two bands, and when the dust settled the bands each agreed to do a set. First up was a decent cover band, doing good songs the way we heard them on the radio, including a pretty good but uninspired version of

Jimi Hendrix's "Red House." I don't remember that band's name.

Randy Hopper and his band did the second set with their mix of country-Americana originals. Several songs in, Hopper invited *Heather Morgan* up to do a song. Mischievously, I suppose, I whispered into *Morgan's* ear, "Do 'Red House.'" She went to the stage, whispered with *Hopper*, and they did, indeed, do "Red House." Only, as I knew they would, a blistering version that was, yes, an interpretation rather than a cover. People from the other band returned from the back room, open mouthed, to listen to this inspired version that even included a made-up verse about the birthday girl leav-

ing her kids at home — which she'd done, with a babysitter — so she could go out and party.

This wasn't, by far, my first love affair with an interpretation bringing something new to an old song, but it's still one of my favorites.

The one that really defined interpretations for me remains *Ruthie Foster's* slow, late-night burning take on *Johnny* and *June Carter Cash's* "Ring of Fire." Listen to it. Now. This is the anchor song on my in-progress album of inspired interpretations by women singers of familiar songs. *Morgan's* version of "The Weight" is, too, partially because she was still so young when she decided to do that enigmatic song. Others on this album will include, among as many as I can get onto a playlist, *Ashlee Rose's* version of (see the pyramids along the Nile) *You Belong to Me*, *Eva Cassidy's* version of *Sting's* "Fields of Gold," *Mary Catherine Reynolds's* version of *Donovan's* "Catch the Wind," *blacktopGYPSY's* version of *Terri Hendrix's* "I Found the Lions," *Kacey Musgraves's* early recording of "Heart of Gold," *Sarah Jarosz's* "Ring Them Bells," young *Jackie Evancho's* rendition of the ever-popular "Pie Jesu," and, yes, *Miley Cyrus's* version of "You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go."

Something from *Gray's* new album is certain to be on my imaginary album, too. A good interpretation helps bring new meaning into our lives, helps us, as *Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* suggested in another context, come a little bit closer to the truth by inhabiting the world a little more fully. First- and second-hand experiences filtered through experiences.

I'm through writing now. I'm going to listen to my imaginary album of interpretations, and, perhaps, contemplate the meaning of meaning. ■