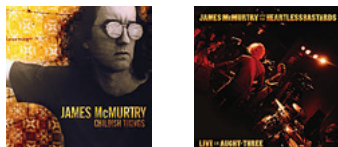


Right” is apropos, since it was coupled with “Gimme Some Skin” on the aforementioned boot singles.

Williamson’s crunching, ripping guitar is onboard, with Mike Watt on drums and Steve Mackay on sax. With 63-year-old Iggy leading the way, the quintet sounds like a force of nature – think earthquake, tsunami, volcano – more than validating the underrated instrumentalists as, in their leader’s words, “a crack band in a class of our own.” – **DF**



James McMurtry
Childish Things
Live in Aught-Three

Lightning Rod Records

James McMurtry is a great – and underexposed – songwriter. So the re-release of these two records is a good thing.

Childish Things brought him some notoriety at the time of its release because “We Can’t Make it Here” was lauded by critics of the Bush administration for the way it summed up events at the time. A cynic might say the beauty and strength of McMurtry’s writing lies in how the lyric would fit no matter who lives in the White House.

This record is full of great songs like that. And his band, augmented on several cuts by the always-fine guitar of David Grissom, is solid on all of them.

Live in Aught-Three is a superb showcase of McMurtry’s best songs done right, with the help of his band, the Heartless Bastards. His playing was wonderfully simple, while the music is rock and roll and country-rock in the best sense of both. While the record is populated with strong songs, “Choctaw Bingo” is its finest moment. – **JH**



The Band of Heathens
Top Hat Crown & The
Clapmaster’s Son

BOH Records

Trying to describe The Band of Heathens’ music is akin to describing the activities in all three rings of a circus simultaneously. Equal parts blues, rock, country, folk, and a dollop of old-timey, the Band of Heathens’ latest album may be their best.

Top Hat Crown & The Clapmaster’s Son is the creation of Ed Jurdi, Gordy Quist, and Colin Brooks. Together they play a bewildering number of instruments including electric and acoustic guitars, lap steel, ukulele, bass, keyboards, and organ. They also wrote all but one of the songs.

This three-headed-frontman arrangement allows the band to have a wider range of styles and voices, and

because the three write songs as a team, they have a cohesive quality.

While their last album tilted toward country, *Top Hat Crown & The Clapmaster’s Son* leans heavily on the bluesy side. The opening tune, “Medicine Man,” begins the CD with a sassy white boy blues riff a la the Counting Crows. The tune is almost Zeppelin-ish in its audacity and power. The second cut, “I Should Have Known,” has an equally intoxicating opening riff before it migrates into a gospel rollick.

With a rock and roll attitude reminiscent of another Austin band, The Gourds, Band of Heathens creates music not easily forgotten. – **SS**



Henry Wolfe
Linda Vista

Self-distributed

If you appreciate lovely melodies and the occasional surprising chord change, you’ll dig Henry Wolfe’s latest, *Linda Vista*.

Like the work of a young Paul McCartney or Harry Nilsson, Wolfe has a unique way of assembling songs, and a versatile singing style. “Used to Be” is the perfect example of what he does best: chunky guitars mix with classic pop keyboards and a harmonica solo to create fresh pop music. “Open the Door” has a fingerpicked opening played with clean electric tones reminiscent of mid-/late-’70s Paul Simon, and its jazz-pop feel backs the notion. Tremolo is used wonderfully throughout this record, and electric guitar adds whenever employed, like on the menacingly-toned “The Third Act.”

Wolfe can write a hook. “Stop the Train” is hypnotic, while “Errant Lover” fades out with a descending chord pattern reminiscent of the Beatles’ “Dear Prudence.”

Linda Vista is full of moments that are, by turns, sweet and melancholy. It’s made up of 10 songs for fans of smart pop in the classic sense. – **JH**



Stephen Bennett
In-A-Gadda-Da-Stephen

Harp Guitar Music

“Punny” title and trippy graphics aside, this is a great concept, executed brilliantly. It’s also a ton of fun.

Bennett is nothing if not prolific. In his mid 50s, he has released an album or instructional CD-ROM per year, more or less, since 1992. Once the opening strains of “Light My Fire” blast out of your CD player, you can’t help but wonder why it took him (or somebody) so long to do a complete album of classic-rock tunes arranged for solo harp guitar.

In doing so, Bennett not only

displays his formidable playing and arranging skills, but illustrates how varied rock music from the late ’60s to mid ’70s was – from psychedelic (“In-cense And Peppermints”) to pre-metal (“Born To Be Wild”), encompassing the rootsy (“Honky Tonk Women”) as well as the pseudo classical (“A Whiter Shade Of Pale”). There’s an extra helping of progressive rock, via King Crimson (“The Court Of The Crimson King”), Pink Floyd (“Time/Breathe”), and Yes (“Soon”), and Bennett explains that there are no Beatles songs because he already devoted an album to the Fab Four – *Beatles Acoustic Guitar Solos*, 2005.

On the guitar side, all songs are played in standard tuning except Jethro Tull’s “Teacher” (DADGBD), while the Dyer’s six sub-bass harp strings’ tuning varies, usually on just the lowest string, with the exception of “Wind Cries Mary.” And on the CD’s bonus track, “You Really Got Me,” Bennett plays an acoustic baritone guitar tuned a fifth lower than standard (but he passed up a royal opportunity to re-create Dave Davies’ teen-angst solo).

There’s not a clinker to be found here. So, in addition to the aforementioned, the collection’s highlights include everything else – Cream’s “White Room,” Blind Faith’s “Can’t Find My Way Home,” the Who’s “Behind Blue Eyes,” and Mountain’s “Theme For An Imaginary Western.” – **DF**



Matraca Berg
The Dreaming Fields

Dualtone

Matraca Berg’s music occupies that slice of musical real estate between commercial hot country and singer/songwriter/Americana. On this, her first studio album in 14 years, Berg reestablishes her claim to the upper echelons of modern country.

The music on *The Dreaming Fields* reflects Berg’s concerns as a woman growing up in the South and now part of an ever-changing world. “Clouds” is a very different song from Joni Mitchell’s tune by the same name, and highlights Berg’s pristine vocals and her ability to compose a lyrically beautiful song. The title tune offers up a family history that dwells on the future as influenced by the past.

All arrangements are purposefully understated, with sparse piano and strings forming the underpinnings of the aural landscape. Acoustic-guitar master Richard Bennett joined Dug Dugmore on pedal and lap steel, Glenn Worf on bass, Tim Lauer on keyboards, Harry Stinson and Greg Morrow on drums, to form the core band on the album. Suzy Boguss, Gretchen Peters, Jessi Alexander Stewart, and Jaime Hanna add background vocals.

Tired of modern country music

that’s all flash and no substance? Here’s the antidote. – **SS**



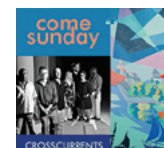
Maggie Bjorklund
Coming Home

Bloodshot Records

With *Coming Home*, Danish guitar/pedal-steel player Maggie Bjorklund carves a niche with a record that sounds as different as anything you’ll likely to hear in 2011. Serving up acoustic, electric, and pedal-steel guitar on most of the cuts, she doesn’t sing lead, but when she *does* sing, her voice is perfect accompaniment. Bjorklund wrote most of this music, which includes a handful of instrumental tunes that expertly showcases what she does. “Wasteland” is an evocative piece with a gorgeous melody, beautiful changes, and more pedal-steel. “Falling” is just steel and drums – an eerie piece that conveys its title. “Insekt” starts with a very voice-like pedal-steel sound before distortion is added, and “Frost” has a lovely, floating feel.

Singers Mark Lanegan, Rachel Flotard, Jon Auer, and others fit the songs and music like hands in a well-worn glove.

Coming Home is a beautiful record that shows every instrument and voice in service to the music. Even without a gaudy displays of chops, it’s one of the most interesting records of the year. – **JH**



Come Sunday
Crosscurrents

Self-released

Vying for the title of “busiest jazz guitarist in Chicago,” in this corner (opposite Bobby Broom) we have Mike Allemana. Best known as guitarist with sax great Von Freeman since ’97, the 41-year-old juggles at least nine other groups and has released three solo albums, in addition to sessions with Freeman, organist Charles Earland, and Brian O’Hern’s Model Citizens Big Band, as well as a duo album with singer Gingi Lahera.

Three instrumentalists and four vocalists comprise Come Sunday, named for a Duke Ellington tune that was part of his 1958 *Black, Brown, and Beige* album with Mahalia Jackson. The group’s debut includes a stirring rendition of the song, which fits nicely into Allemana’s marriage of jazz and gospel.

For this project, most of the repertoire is traditional, although Stevie Wonder’s “Heaven Is 10 Zillion Light Years Away” sits comfortably alongside Alex Bradford’s loping gospel standard “Too Close To Heaven,” featuring an energetic, bluesy guitar intro.

Allemana, who took up guitar at 10, discovered jazz via George Benson at 12 and scrutinized the playing of Cal