

# Tom Geddie's 25 favorite Texas-related CDs of 2012

**F**EW THINGS ARE LESS CERTAIN IN LIFE than opinions about art. It may be possible to argue that this one is great and that one is bad, but it's the in-betweens that are hard to nail down. One person's masterpiece is another person's mess, no matter what the experts say they believe.

That said, here are my 25 favorite Texas-related albums of 2012. Point one: I must like the albums on the list better than any other Texas-related albums I've heard this year. Point two: there are a lot of good albums I haven't heard at all, and wish I had. Point three: "Texas-related" is hard to define; basically, it's somebody who was born in Texas or raised in Texas or lives here now or who spent a lot of time — however we want to define that — here.

1. Various Artists, *This One's for Him: a Tribute to Guy Clark*: 30 tracks by 33 Americana artists who are friends and colleagues of Clark or who have been influenced by his remarkable compositions. The cast in-



cludes Lyle Lovett, Willie Nelson, James McMurtry, Joe Ely, Emmylou Harris & John Prine, Steve Earle, Patty Griffin, Kris Kristofferson, Vince Gill, Ray Wylie Hubbard, and more.

2. Rodney Crowell and Mary Karr, *Kin*: one of the most respected of country songwriters teams up with the *New York Times*-bestselling poet and memoirist Mary Karr to look back at growing up in "colorful" families in Southeast Texas. Crowell, Vince Gill, and Kris Kristofferson singing half the songs from a male viewpoint and Norah Jones, Lucinda Williams, Lee Ann Womack, Rosanne Cash, and



Emmylou Harris sing the other five from a female viewpoint.

3. Ruthie Foster, *Let It Burn*: features noted New Orleans musicians, the legendary gospel group The Blind Boys of Alabama, soul legend William Bell, three of her own songs, and both spiritual and sensual re-interpretations of songs made famous by Adele, the Black Keys, Los Lobos, Johnny Cash, Robbie Robertson, Pete Seeger, David Crosby, and others. Foster redefines interpretations with her slow-burning take on the Johnny Cash/June Carter Cash hit "Ring of Fire."

4. Chris Wall, *El Western Motel*: his first CD in 10 years — the short explanation is chemo, radiation, three surgeries, and the financial consequences thereof, as Wall put it — shares a dozen new, original songs. Familiar themes. Handled well. Consistently good. Many of them could be depressing, but they're not; they just describe hard times, old times, and the prospects of, one way or another, moving on. Without apologies.

5. Mike McClure, *Fifty Billion*: might be his best offering yet among eight Mike McClure Band CDs and six Great Divide CDs. More rock than country, it fits within the Americana range (whatever that is) and roams a lot of fairly intense — musically and lyrically — territory in its 10 new, original songs.

6. Ray Wylie Hubbard, *The Grifter's Hymnal*: sounds a lot like Hubbard's other recent work, which is a good thing. Filled with similar themes including his own brand of spiritual seeking, bits of biography or semi-biography, and playful, sometimes pointed humor in the quirky lyrics, it's filled with rough-voiced vocals and greasy, blues-based music that wanders into folk 'n' rock.

7. Jason Eady, *AM Country Heaven*: the always excellent Eady plows through cliched subject matter — or simply golden oldie themes, take your pick — in an interesting, well written and well

played way. Eady sets the mood with the opening, title song, claiming: "I miss the days when the women were ugly and the men were all 40 years old, 'cause you had to say something for people to listen. Now they just do what they're told. Well, it's all about idols with pretty blonde hair and how many trucks you can sell."

8. Billy Joe Shaver, *Live at Billy Bob's Texas*: a bunch of familiar songs and a couple of new-to-CD ones including "The Git Go," a sober, stirring song that takes us all the way back to Adam and Eve as he points out injustices that haunt us today. The accompanying DVD shares his denim-clad, tent-revival preacher approach to flesh and spirit. Touted as Shaver's first newly recorded live performances since 1995.

9. Janie Fricke, *Country Side of Bluegrass*: New versions of a dozen of the two-time Country Music Association female vocalist of the year's 18 chart-topping songs from her 23 albums. It's a very good listen, more traditional country — sometimes bluegrass — than the more country-pop she was once known for. Fricke's voice is a little bit thicker these days, and that sounds good, too; it fits these versions of the songs well.

10. Norah Jones *Little Broken Hearts*: much closer to mainstream musically than her earlier work, and often lyrically dark as it delves into a failed relationship, desire, and victimization. It's a coherent cycle of songs about the breaking of hearts and the aftermath — the take and take of once-convenient "love." Jones still has that killer voice, and the dozen songs are often slow and wistful.

11. The Little Willies, *For the Good Times*: It's hard to not think of The Little Willies as Norah Jones and four guys. Which isn't fair to the four guys, whoever they are? The Little Willies have at least five songs — maybe more — on this CD 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.

12. Esperanza Spalding, *Radio Music Society*: Spalding continues to experiment with sound variations; this time, the feel is jazzier mixed with some Latin influences. The young bassist/vocalist/composer who lives in Austin the last I heard delivers a dozen consistently good, mostly quietly energy-filled songs, each segueing pretty much seamlessly into the next backed by horns,

keyboards, percussion, and more.

13. Lyle Lovett, *Release Me*: 14 songs ranging from traditional country to the blues to rock to gospel to American classics and



traditional to, on "White Freightliner Blues," the genre that is the legacy of Townes Van Zandt. Lovett duets with k.d. lang on the traditional country classic "Release Me," with Kat Edmonson on the still enjoyable chestnut "Baby, it's Cold Outside," with Sara Watkins on "Dress of Laces" and his own songs "The Girl with the Holiday Smile" and "Night's Lullaby," and with others.

14. Cody Jinks, *30*: Jinks has that deep-voiced, traditional country sound combined with the youthful grit of the typical, so-called Texas/Red Dirt sound, which he transcends right from the opening a capella verse of "(caught somewhere in between) A Memory and a Dream." This fiddle-and-steel-laced CD is filled with tumbling and redemption, guns and God, and hope for his young "Lady Bug."

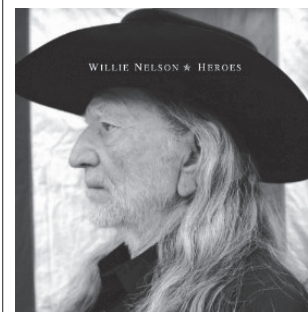
15. Michael O'Neal, *Learning As I Go*: is underrated as a songwriter that he's almost unknown, even in the Northeast Texas area where he plays a couple of times a month. O'Neal continues to write and deliver the kinds of songs Chris Knight might write if Knight had been raised in Paris, Texas. On a dozen songs, most of them his own, O'Neal shares vignettes and stories that put the listener in the middle of a place and a circumstance. While not everybody will relate personally to the stories — whether he or someone else wrote them — the emotions ring true as slices of the human experience.

16. Jimmy LaFave, *Depending on the Distance*: takes the romantic route on most of the 13 songs, often serenading sentimentality for all it's worth. LaFave's first studio album in five years includes eight originals, three Bob Dylan interpretations and one by Bruce Springsteen, and his version of the 1980s hit "Missing You." It's a mixture of folk, blues, and melodic roots rock.

17. Waylon Jennings, *Goin'*

*Down Rockin': The Last Recordings*: Jennings recorded the songs on 'Goin' Down Rockin' during the last few years of his life, working with his longtime bass player Robby Turner in Turner's studio. Jennings sang and played guitar; Turner added bass, and 10 years later went back in and overdubbed the recordings with additional musicians (without ever losing the welcome sparseness of the original recordings). Most of the songs were new ones he'd been working on; all are pretty much consistently vintage Jennings, often a bit contemplative.

18. Willie Nelson, Lukas Nelson & Friends, *Heroes*: a country album with Snoop Dogg on it? Sure, why not? "Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die," done by Willie, Snoop Dog, Kris Kristofferson, and Jamey Johnson. Although Willie holds his own on a couple of solos, he gives much of the spotlight to the guests: Merle Haggard, Sheryl Crow, Billy Joe Shaver, Ray Price, Dogg, Kristofferson, Johnson,



and, on the next-to-closing closing "Come On Back Jesus" with Lukas and Micah Nelson.

19. Nanci Griffith, *Intersection*: It took a while to get into this CD, which on first listen seemed too much of a downer even for me. Griffith's seasoned, appealing voice kept me listening and I'm glad it did. The dozen folk-based-but-not-bound songs — some that she wrote, some that she interprets — often seem to be about somebody who's tried and who wistfully persists.

20. Seth Walker, *Time Can Change*: owes as much of its joy to old-style soul as to any other genre, although it's not really soul. It is soulful with its smooth, kinda jazzy vocals and music, and it's a consistently more-than-listenable collection of a dozen songs mostly about love and its occasional — or frequent, it seems — emotional perils. It's a state where it's all right to leave a few things unsaid, to accommodate one another in avoiding loneliness no matter what the cost, the sadness of never looking back, and more.

21. Ruby Jane, *Celebrity: Empire of Emptiness*: On at least two songs on what I believe is her

first studio CD, the 17-year-old is already thinking about fame. She's got some of it; she's seen what it's done to some other people. The inspiration for "XXVII" was the death of Amy Winehouse at the age of 27, and Jane sings "time like water is washing away" and of fame's possibilities as a suicide machine. The roots-alt/pop CD is not at all a downer; it's simply thoughtful, well-played roots/pop.

22. Aaron Watson, *Real Good Time*: shares Texas country, real country, and just enough — not much — country pop to satisfy commercial radio stations. On his 11th album in 12 years, Watson also manages to make a bit of fun of the pop hybrid with the satirical "Hey Y'all," which he laughingly calls his contribution to ruining country music. He manages to cover a lot of the common bases including veterans, rodeo, honky-tonks, good times and neon signs, church, being young and restless, fishing and hunting, and other bits of romance and broken hearts. He does them well enough that perhaps they are at least as sincere as they are commercially viable.

23. The Trishas, *High, Wide & Handsome*: the album's title comes from a line in their song "Mother of Invention," which wouldn't be out of place in the river scene from "O Brother Where Art Thou?." The album's harmonies are great, the playing is near-great, and the songs range from good to great. It's country and country-folk, and more.

24. Walt Wilkins, *Plenty*: tribute to his growing up in the Texas Hill Country and the even greater appreciation he feels for the region after moving home from a stint in Nashville. That appreciation is for the landscape, but even more about the people and the musical mix of, as he puts it, jukebox country and soul, blues, Tejano, storyteller folk, and cowboy songs.

25. blacktopGYPSY, *Whirlwind*: mostly a mix of



love and lost love and even longing love songs that are country without much twang. Andie Kay Joyner calls the music a mixture of influences including Merle Haggard, Fleetwood Mac, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Bill Monroe, John Denver, Willie Nelson, Aretha Franklin, and The Allman Brothers. ■