

RECORD REVIEWS

Randy Travis Influences Vol. 1: The Man I Am Warner Brothers

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, COUNTRY music superstar Randy Travis made his home in Tioga (Texas), already on the music map as the birthplace of Gene Autry, and since then he has become "one of us."

The seven-time Grammy award-winning icon released his 21st studio album, "Influences Vol. 1: The Man I Am," recently, this one unique in several ways. The first is that it is the first studio-recorded CD in which his touring band provides the music, rather than studio musicians. Also, it is covers, strictly previously recorded cover songs, and that is because he is honoring those country legends that have made him "The man I am." Although now Travis is himself an icon, he still considers those who paved the way for him as his personal idols, as those who were instrumental in his formative years and in the way he crafts his own music, even to this day.

The songs cover nine decades, beginning with the first-release date of 1924, Thelma La Vizzo's blues/country song, "Trouble In Mind," which Merle Haggard re-released in 1996. This song has an amazing mix of fiddle, guitar, and steel guitar licks, accented with a rinky-tink piano break.

The last, or 13th song, on the CD is a new release, a tribute to his longtime friend, the late George Jones. Travis cut a duet with Joe Nichols on this one, "Tonight I'm Playin' Possum," written by Keith Gattis. Other songs on the record were made great by Ernest Tubbs, Lefty Frizzell, Louis Armstrong in 1926 and then Haggard in 1985 ("Big Butter & Egg Man"); Waylon Jennings ("Because You Asked Me To" co-written by Jennings and Willie Nelson in the 1970s); and the great George Jones himself.

"When I think of my musical heroes of yesteryear, or the younger stars of this year, I am reminded that it is true we learn from the ones ahead of us, and teach the ones that

follow. They are the reason I chose to make this album," Travis said in a press release.

Somehow, in all the mix and variety of styles and musicians that Travis chose to honor and emulate with this project, he still manages in this new CD to keep his own style completely intact. The voice, the style, is unmistakably Randy Travis; the arrangements are mixes of the original musicians and of Travis' own band.

Travis suffered critical health problems earlier this year, and those around him only comment now that he has been allowed to return to his home and is working hard on his recovery. He had this project in the can before those bad times hit him.

—MARY JANE FARMER

Kimberly M'Carver Hard Waltz Kocker Records

THERE ARE ENOUGH WELL-crafted, real country tears on **Kimberly M'Carver's** new *Hard Waltz* to fill the late-night dance floor at one of those old honky-tonk halls out on the edge of town.

We get "Devil or Fool," where a stranger wanders free, lost, and blind, lamenting, "once I was hungry, once I had fire, now there's a burden void of desire . . . tell me if there's a soul left in me."

We get "Redemption," where we learn that others walked in the darkness before us, and "as you peer into the blackness, try to see what's deep inside, for others saw before you, your pain no one denies, you think why must I wait for the angels, can't they see I'm far from home."

We get a bit of bluegrass, a woman who'd be glad to be the cowboy's rodeo clown, some longing, a goodbye or two, and more.

M'Carver wrote all the songs, including one co-write with **Eric Korb**.

She got considerable help from her co-producer **Scott Neubert** (mandolin, acoustic and electric guitars, pedal steel, dobro, steel guitar, and harmony vocals), **John Thompson** (acoustic and electric bass), **Steve**

Holland (drums), **Eamon McLoughlin** (fiddle), **Jeff Taylor** (accordion, whistle), **Matt Wingate** (mandolin), and **Claire Lynch** and **Korb** (harmony vocals).

—TOM GEDDIE

Lincoln Durham Exodus of the Deemed Unrighteous Droog Records

IN THE *EXODUS OF THE DEEMED Unrighteous*, we find, in the aggressively played, greasy feeling blues and blues-rock, a collection that includes intensity, moodiness, sparse but spot-on descriptions, and, oh yes, 10 songs by **Lincoln Durham**

using, as he puts it, "only the cheapest 'instruments' and most percussive household items" he and producer **George Reiff** could find.

Perhaps the album asks us to consider the darker sides of justice and redemption and righteousness? If so, it does so compellingly.

The opening "Ballad of a Prodigal Son" is a gospel-sounding blues about what can happen during the search for truth: "Father don't you recognize your own kin . . . my hair is longer and my face drawn thin from years of searching for the truth . . . in the valley of the bones."

In "Beautifully Sewn, Violently Torn," a mother tells her daughter: "Hush, Ellie Mae, you're safe and sound, daddy won't be showin' his face around, he's gone to join ol' death for tea, he's gonna tell him about the little girl who grew big teeth."

Among the other songs, we get short treatises on a green-eyed creature with a face of gold and about keeping the demons at bay with a shot of Old Crow.

Durham plays guitar, lap steel, harmonica, piano, fiddle, Samsonite suitcase, cigar box guitar, and wind chimes. Rick **Richards** adds drums and oil pan. Reiff adds kalimba and **Alissa Durham** and **Andrew Hernandez** add additional vocals. People clap, too. It comes together well; the gimmicks are not overdone.

—TOM GEDDIE

The Nightwls Good as Gold Self-released

GOOD AS GOLD FROM **The Nightwls** is a consistently enjoyable soul/pop collection of nine songs that sound a bit like the "golden oldies" without becoming lost in the retro. Underneath that upbeat sound, there's a sort of, without trying to overstate it, existential angst, making this something to dance to or to wallow in. Depending on your mood and your perception, perhaps.

The danceable part wins out, for sure, despite the opening plea to "Break My Heart Tonight," the next-to-last plea of "I'm Sorry Baby," and the closing "Blood Run Cold" where he hopes the ghosts don't creep out of the shadows, because he knows he's been bad and a fool.

The band is **Ryan Harkrider** (singer-songwriter), **Justin Smith** (trumpet), **Jonathan McNutt** (saxophone), **Amos Traystman** (guitar), **Rob Alton** (bass), **Ben Petree** (drums), **Oscar Interiano** (keyboards), and **Tara Williamson** and **Ellie Carroll** (vocals).

The young Austin-based group—formed in October 2011—gets into the old Motown sound on its full-length debut album that's produced by **Jake Langley** (who's worked with **Roberta Flack** and **Bobby Blue Bland**).

—TOM GEDDIE

Slaid Cleaves Still Fighting the War Music Road Records

ON *STILL FIGHTING THE WAR*, **Slaid Cleaves** remains one of our most down-to-earth, literate songwriters about the often-existential world of working people, which is most of us. The themes among the 13 songs are mostly familiar but Cleaves delivers them well enough in his distinctive voice that that's okay and, in its own way, comforting. There's the vet who's still, as the title says, fighting the war; the slow weeper of life "Without Her;" the deteriorating Rust Belt town; the small-town girl who wanted to be a star and the drifter who's coming home; the not-always-welcome passage of time; etc.

There's also the semi-obligatory tribute to Texas complete with steel guitar and a yodel, and a tribute to "God's Own Yodeler" **Don Walser**, the so-called Pavarotti of the Plains.



He wrote or co-wrote most of *Still Fighting the War*: **Slaid Cleaves**

Cleaves wrote or co-wrote most of the songs including two with longtime writing partner **Rod Picott** and worked with producers **Scrappy Jud Newcomb** (nine of the songs) plus

Mark Hallman and **Lloyd Maines** on two each.

Still Fighting the War is consistently good, well-produced folk/Americana collection with the right tension in the music in the right songs. This one's another keeper.

—TOM GEDDIE

Johnny Winter The Essential Johnny Winter Sony Music Entertainment

TO HELP US REMEMBER THE old days of aggressive and entertaining blues-rock, and to make a few extra bucks, Sony has released the two-disc, 34-song *The Essential Johnny Winter*.

Winter is still with us, of course, still touring in his 50-plus-year career. In addition to how own Grammy-nominated albums he has produced three Grammy-winning albums for blues legend **Muddy Waters**. He's also a member of the **Blues Foundation Hall of Fame** and was named by *Rolling Stone* magazine as #63 among the "100 greatest guitarists of all time."

This collection features performances—sometimes live in concert, sometimes in studio—of some of his own songs—including "Leland Mississippi Blues," "Hustled Down in Texas," "Prodigal Son," and "Black Cat Bone," for example—with his versions of other classic blues songs and a few surprises.

Among the highlights: "**Big Bill Broonzy's** "Rock Me Baby," **Bob Dylan's** "Highway 61 Revisited," **Rick Derringer** and **Lou Reed's** "Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo," **John Lennon's**

"Rock and Roll People," **Chuck Berry's** "Johnny B. Goode," and "**Larry Williams** "Bony Moronie." There's also a version of "Harlem Shuffle" that Winter does with his brother, **Edgar Winter**.

—TOM GEDDIE

Breting Engel Breting Engel Big Bend Records

IT'S NOT UNUSUAL, WHEN MUSICIANS or their management remember to include a news release of pertinent info with their CDs for review, to suggest certain songs as "emphasis tracks" because these are the ones that the musicians or their management, if they have management, believe are either the best ones or the ones most likely to get air play.

I often don't agree with the choices. In the case of **Breting Engel's** self-titled release, I don't agree with any of them. I don't dislike the emphasis tracks on this folk/Americana collection of a dozen of Engel's songs; I would just put the emphasis elsewhere. To be specific, the 2:45 "Sleep Standing Up" rather than "Avalon," "Inside," or "Ruidoso Astronaut."

Why? I really like the music, which is somewhere between haunting and uplifting, the somewhat Dylanesque vocals, and the lyrics that tell us a (particular) woman is more trouble than she's worth.

Engel (vocals, guitar, harmonica) is accompanied on the album by **Brian Standefer** (cello, harmonies), **Jeff Plankenhorn** (lead guitar, mandolin, lap steel, banjo), **Gary Calhoun James** (bass), **Jesse Ebaugh** (pedal steel), and **Dony Wynn** (percussion). Engel and Standefer co-produced.

—TOM GEDDIE

AMERICANA TEXAS

By Tom
Geddie

Emily Elbert IS IN LOVE. And sometimes suffering because of it. Although I don't know that that's true, it's the impression I get from her new, four-song EP *Evolve*. She's 24 years old now, so it's about—or past—time for that swelling of the heart and its breaking, to swell and break again.

We are supposed to react to songs—like the reaction above, or whatever the songs evoke—and those reactions are tied both to the words and music themselves and to the performance and to who the artist is or who we think the artist is and what's going on in our own minds when we hear the songs.

The songs are not background noise for whatever we're doing, but are our partners—however temporary or for however long—in our lives. Really listening to a song is like standing in front of a piece of art in a museum, and really studying that art. Not just glancing at it as we walk by.

These thoughts come to me as I opened today's mail and put the CD into my computer and began to listen. I really don't know how to define her music except, perhaps, to call it jazzy soul pop with a small Latin kinda accent and even a bit of **Badu**.

Even before the DFW Metroplex—there's a quaint old word—graduated from the prestigious Berkeley School of Music a couple of years ago, she was taking her music around the world.

The songs here are, like most of Elbert's work, timeless, gently sensual, intelligent, well written, well sung, and well and gently played.

The opener is "In with the New." She"—her or her character—can't stop smiling because the love she's been searching for has been here all the time.

This song is followed by "(it's not

the) End of the World" because our love doesn't—no matter how we think it might—have that kind of power; the world was here before us, and will be here after us.

Then the title song, where we believe that love sets us free.

Finally, "(in a) World without Your Love," we seek solace in the shadows, hoping to "searching silence to find the cracks within the walls where the light breaks through."

Almost all of it delivered with an upbeat sort of feel.

The first time I saw Elbert perform was at Crossroads Coffeehouse and Music Company in Winnsboro, when she sat cross-legged on a bar stool one rare evening when the air conditioning failed to work. She sweated her way through a fine performance.

I saw her again at a small, defunct coffeehouse in Mineola. The next time I'll see her, most likely, is on December 28, at The Old Firehouse in Edom another fine listening room.

Yes, she still plays small, local and regional gigs. But in the past three years, she's done more than 700 gigs in 15 countries, often solo with her guitar, sometimes with accompanists or in dual-billed shows. She's also opened for, among others, **Leon Russell**, **G. Love & Special Sauce**, **Tuck & Patti**, **Richie Havens**, **James Hunter**, **Patty Larkin**, and **Ruthie Foster**. (I'm proud to think that I might have introduced Foster's music to Elbert.) That's a diverse bunch of musicians; even more diverse, perhaps, was her performance at the **T-Bone Walker Blues Fest** in Linden.

Through the U.S. Embassy, she's led cultural outreach workshops in Thailand, Indonesia, Scotland, Palestine, and Israel.

Her YouTube channel has more

than 1.5 million views, including more than 400,000 views of her version of **Michael Jackson's** "Thriller."

Back in 2010, *Glamour* magazine named her as one of its 10 college women "you haven't heard of—yet." She's won plenty of other honors.

You get the picture: she's talented, she works hard, and expectations are piled upon her.

Elbert was raised in what some would consider the artistic wasteland of the Mid Cities between Dallas and Fort Worth, perhaps putting another geographical stereotype to rest. She played piano—her dad, professional musician **Roland Elbert's** instrument—growing up, then got her first guitar when she was 14, taught herself to play, and played until her fingers bled.

With the guitar came a love for the music of **Jimi Hendrix** and **Joni Mitchell**, of **Dave Matthews**, **John Mayer**, **Jack Johnson**, and others. She can talk knowledgeably about **Buddy Guy's** guitar solo on "Red House," and **Ella Fitzgerald's** vocal prowess. She picked up a black belt in taekwon do.

She's always wanted to do her music career her own way, like **Beck** and **Bob Dylan**.

Some of her idols "were taking those ideals of the '60s stuff I loved so much . . . and (they could) take an acoustic instrument and keep the troubadour thing going, could be their own band, write songs, and take them on the road," she said. "That pretty quickly became what I knew I wanted to do. And it hasn't stopped since then."

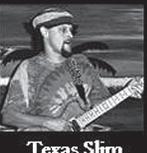
Evolve. Evolution. What's ahead? Well, first, there's now. Then there's then. Emily Elbert seems filled with unspoiled goodness. She is in love. With the music, for sure. With that swelling of the heart and its breaking, to swell and break again. ■

Blues Jam Every Tuesday

TAILGATERS

SPORTS BAR & GRILL

Hosted by

12/3	GANGSTA' OF LOVE HOLLAND K. SMITH plus JAM
12/10	BLUES JAMMIN' with THE TEXAS TOPCATS
12/17	JAM plus SPECIAL GUEST TEXAS SLIM
12/24	MERRY CHRISTMAS BABY NO JAM
12/31	NEW YEARS EVE PARTY!! NO JAM

14831 MIDWAY RD., ADDISON, TEXAS 75001 972-385-7653

8:30 PM 214-484-5677 NO COVER