

New Amsterdams Keeps It Simple; Rigsby Makes a Bluegrass Hit

The New Amsterdams Never You Mind

★★★

With every technological advance in rock music, purists inevitably seize the opportunity to decry the dearth of intimacy and humanity in music.

When technology diverts the focus of rock from songcraft and emotional expression, the classicists contend, the soul of the music gets lost.

Somewhere along the line, the rise of these forward-thinkers gave birth to a counter-movement of backward-glancers in rock, artists whom the romanticized figure of the solo acoustic troubadour continues to inspire.

With the mantle passed between greats like Hank Williams, Nick Drake and Neil Young, neo-purists have a wealth of influences from which to draw. Get Up Kids frontman Matthew Pryor's offshoot project, the New Amsterdams, mines that same vein of introspection on the heartfelt *Never You Mind*.

Though Pryor occasionally fleshes out his songs with a full-band accompaniment, the New Amsterdams feels like a band in name only. With his voice and acoustic guitar always at the fore, Pryor makes *Never You Mind* his own album.

Fortunately, Pryor boasts a pleasantly ragged voice (somewhere between the sweetness of Sean Lennon and the edge of Whiskeytown's Ryan Adams) and the smarts to avoid the self-pity common to would-be troubadours.

Instead, Pryor extends a hand of compassion to his troubled muses in songs like "Lonely Hearts" and "Drama Queen." Love and heartbreak fill Pryor's lyrics, but Pryor makes sure to suffuse these lamentations with faith, hope and an appreciation of beauty, traits absent from the "complaint rock" that most sad-eyed indie boys prefer.

Such unadorned music seems simple to replicate, but with his occasional missteps, Pryor proves that acoustic balladry remains a deceptively easy ven-

ture fraught with potential pitfalls.

The genius of a solo artist like Nick Drake rested in his ability to suggest depths of meaning with just a few words and a fingerpicked acoustic guitar. Pryor seeks that resonance but too often resorts to lyrics that trail off into clichés or never manage to say anything at all.

And, his arrangements often lack the complexity of Drake or Young, as Pryor essentially cuts-and-pastes the three-chord aesthetic of the Get Up Kids onto the acoustic guitar.

On "When We Two Parted," Pryor perfectly aligns lyrical conflict with his musical backdrop. Unfortunately, it's a cover of the Afghan Whigs and not Pryor's own composition.

However, with his impassioned voice and the heartfelt, redemptive bent of his songs, Pryor seems on the brink of something far richer than just another side project.

By Josh Love

The Gourds Bolsa de Agua

★★★

The Gourds are an American band. That is about as precise as it gets.

Bolsa de Agua, the Austin-based quintet's fourth release, sounds like a moon-shine-fueled bluegrass jam at an Appalachian farm house on the Texas plains; cowboys dancing mountain jigs in the middle of Bourbon Street; Minnie Pearl gettin' freak — you get the picture.

Bolsa ..., released on Durham's Sugar Hill Records, is an eclectic, if uneven, romp through the Gourds' varied influences. Country, bluegrass, zydeco, rock and even a little Irish music vie for control of the band's soul, creating a unique but not quite cohesive sound. The last track's name, "High Higgs & Low Lows," pretty much sums it up.

The band is at their best when they lean more towards the bluegrass. They reach the perfect middle ground somewhere between Deadhead hippy crap and three-toothed, shotgun-toting Hee

Haw music. Uncle Tupelo/Wilco/Freakwater veteran Max Johnston's banjo and mandolin picking, and Claude Bernard's accordion, shine on bouncy tracks like "Pickles," "O Rings" and the Celtic-folk "Bugs."

But it's with the standard, straight-up country or rock tunes that the Gourds falter. In fact, the meat of *Bolsa ...* is sandwiched between two hefty slices of mediocrity.

The album's opener, "El Paso," is just weak. A tired, clichéd country tune about "go in to El Paso," it sounds like it was written in a few minutes. And according to the press kit it was. Huh.

The closing "High Higgs & Low Lows," a mid-paced, low-intensity, highly uninteresting rocker, isn't much better.

But even if *Bolsa ...* is musically inconsistent, the packaging is great. Autumn-colored covers, and the paintings inside, reflect the record's general tone.

Even better, the Gourds aren't too cool to include lyrics in the liner notes. With singer Kev Russell's cryptic warblings any hints help. Did he just say "Down in the lucky dung and ashes/Down where the lovers gamble and vomit?" Why yes, he did.

And if an artsy booklet weren't enough, *Bolsa ...* is a video-enhanced CD as well. It's supposed to include a video for one of the album's songs. Too bad it didn't work on my computer.

Computer glitches aside, the Gourds deliver a decent record. This bag of water doesn't have too many holes.

By Brian Bedsworth

Debelah Morgan Dance with Me

★★★ 1/2

Maybe it's musical snobbery, but I generally assume that the talent of a chanteuse is inversely proportional to the pains she takes to look beautiful on her album cover.

So from the moment I saw Debelah Morgan staring at me from the cover of her new CD, *Dance With Me*, with elegantly windblown hair, perfect lipgloss and silver eye make-up, I had a pretty good idea of what I was in for.

As it turns out, however, Morgan isn't half bad if you take her for what she's worth — R&B/pop in the grand tradition

of such divas as Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston.

That's Morgan's thing, and she's clearly studied the reigning masters and learned her lesson well. So well, in fact, that she completes this album like the star pupil eagerly finishing a workbook.

The only problem is that Carey and Houston wrote the workbook. As in most exercises, no matter how perfectly one completes them, there's little room for originality.

From the happy-pop melodies to the way Morgan manipulates her voice, it all sounds like something we've heard before. Even those little high-pitched squeal things she does are just soooooo Mariah.

For this reason, Morgan will likely remain in the shadows for the time being — but this is not to say that her album isn't well-crafted and pleasant.

In her press release, Morgan describes her songs with words like "rhythmic," "sexy," and "romp." All these are true. *Dance With Me* is just the groove music that Morgan intends.

The title track, already on the Billboard Top 100, is just as good as any other song playing at a frat party near you. The rest of the songs, appropriately themed on the interchangeable topics of love and "getting it on," are likewise up to par.

Morgan also does have an impressive vocal range. Her voice slip-slides up and down to highs and lows most mortals can only imagine.

Further to her credit, Debelah keeps it clean, fun, and mostly up-tempo.

So while you might mistake her songs for someone else with a better-known name, Morgan's album might make good party music for your next rhythmic sexy romp.

By Joanna Pearson

Don Rigsby Empty Old Mailbox

★★★★

Rollicking traditional bluegrass joins contemporary country on Don Rigsby's latest album, *Empty Old Mailbox*. Rigsby successfully straddles the fence between the two genres, creating an album of close-knit harmonies, folk tales and exceptional musicianship.

While many artists would have diffi-



Debelah Morgan does the diva thing, à la Mariah and Whitney, on her debut release *Dance With Me*.

culty producing a coherent album that delves into two different styles, *Empty Old Mailbox* embraces both equally.

Rigsby, who co-produced the album with Jimmie Lee Sloas, expertly balances vocal harmonization and the LP's acoustic guitar, banjo and mandolin.

Like many country and bluegrass artists, Rigsby sings about religion, covering the traditional eastern Kentucky and West Virginia hymn "I am a Little Scholar." A few contemporary religious tunes are included on the album as well, sometimes slowing the energy but never endangering the album as a whole.

"Dust to Dust" provides the most clear-cut contemporary country track. It not only has a religious tone but comes perilously close to bogging down the album. Rigsby recovers, though, by placing one of the two all-out, vehement

bluegrass tracks afterward, "Louise."

"Louise" and "These Ole' Blues," the two best songs on the album, are frenetic foot-stomping tracks. It's unfortunate that Rigsby doesn't include other quick-paced tracks, which would alleviate the album's ballad-heaviness.

Empty Old Mailbox lyrically spins interesting stories and tales of hard luck. There is the honky-tonk bar that brews trouble, a mysterious spirit haunting a cove and a son begging his mother to not sell the land.

The switch to bluegrass exclusively during the last seven tracks is one of the album's best features. With the slower country ballads gone, Rigsby and his band showcase their incredible ability to have fun and play some music, while creating one of the best albums this year.

By Karen Whitchard

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