



Stewart's 'CD' Round-up

In an ever changing Country music scene, **DIERKS BENTLEY** has one of the longest running recording contracts in Nashville. He's been with Capitol

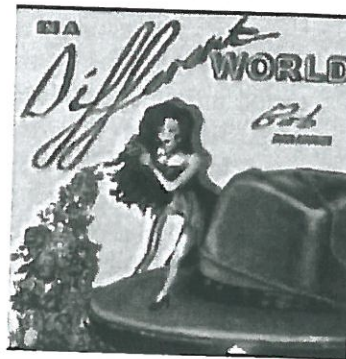


Records since 2003, and produced a string of hits such as "What Was I Thinking" and "Free And Easy, Down The Road I Go". But there's always been something different about Dierks. He's always featured a token bluegrass number on his

albums. Now on his new collection, "Up On The Ridge", he's gone all the way. He's still with Capitol, but this is certainly not your run of the mill Country album. It's an all out Bluegrass classic, with an array of guests including The Punch Brothers, Del McCoury, Miranda Lambert, Jamey Johnson, Chris Thile, Kris Kristofferson, Alison Krauss, Vince Gill, Sonya Isaccs, Sam Bush & Tim O'Brien. The album is produced by Jon Randell Stewart, a veteran of Emmylou's Nash Ramblers. Jon also co-wrote four of the songs, and plays and harmonizing on several tracks too. Interesting to note that both Randell & Bentley appeared at Celtic Connections in Glasgow a few years back. Back to the album though, and there just isn't a bad track. I really enjoyed the fast banjo pickin' on "Rovin' Gambler" and "Fiddlin' Around", the superb vocals on "Bad Angel" with Miranda Lambert and Jamey Johnson (nominated for a CMA Award), and he superb duet on Kristofferson's "Bottle To The Bottom". But stand-out track for me is "Down In The Mine", written by Bentley & Randell, which would have been a perfect song for Kathy Mattea's "Coal" CD, but really fits in well here. It's an honest tribute to miners, without being dark. Sonya Isaccs beautiful harmonies just finish it off beautifully. It's real respectful authentic bluegrass, a breath of fresh air, and my album of the year.

BOB LESLIE is from Glasgow, and proud of it, if his new album, "In A Different World" is anything to go by. Most "Country" acts here depend heavily on American Country music, but this is a definite Glasgow album. Originally from Edinburgh, Bob has been involved with music all his life. His Glaswegian mother was a professional club and theatre singer, while his father's Orkney Islands folk tradition

showed itself in his mastery of piano, accordion, and fiddle. Bob started singing from the cradle and made an early mark on the Edinburgh music scene, winning his first talent show at 14 years old. 20 years as a professional musician, and many more semi-pro, have honed Bob's performance and writing skills to a keen edge. He has played every type of venue from folk and working men's clubs to festivals and theatres. "The Cultural Imperialists Have Got Me" is a good fun number to kick things off. In it, Bob recalls a lot of musical headliners who have influenced him over the years. He slows down on "Beans & Beer", in a gospel sounding number (he has a good voice for gospel), before a catchy line about ducks and hens really get your attention. There's a good number of slower numbers, some of which owe more to jazz than country, but listenable all the same. Of the ballads, I particularly enjoyed "Time To Smell the Roses" But it's the up-tempo numbers which really leave their mark on the album. "The Star Harmonica Band" is a fine tribute to a guy called Jimmy Fletcher, who not only was an inspirational musician, but an inspiration to young junior footballers too. The song features some really neat harmonica too, courtesy of Fraser Spiers. But the one that'll get the most reaction has to be "Cowboy In The Heart Of Glasgow", which



for a few readers, may just be too close to home, but I think we all know a few candidates. It's a good fun, inoffensive song. As well as Fraser Spiers, Bob has amassed a good set of players in Alex Mack, Carl Esprit Bridgeman, Craig Nel-

son, Jim Keilt and Robin Rankin. There's also backing vocals from Alice Leslie and Bernadette Collier. The main project was recorded at North Glasgow College in Springburn. I enjoyed the album. I especially liked the Glasgow aspect. That really worked for me. www.bobleslie.biz

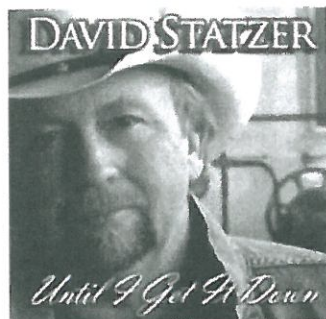
Another new Glasgow recorded album comes from **BRIAN HUGHES**, the Dumbarton based singer songwriter, who has made quite a mark on the British Country scene. His last album won the British Country Music Album of the Year in 2008, and his new release "My Kind Of Paradise" could certainly follow on from that success. Once again, it's eleven self penned tracks, recorded at Blue Productions in Glasgow City Centre. His regular band, The LoneSharks, together with some top notch musicians give the songs a good backing. The songs vary from the young love of "Get Over It" and "Home By Ten" to the

working man influence on "God Bless Friday Night" and his autobiographical "Overnight Success".

The title track bounces along nicely, billed as Brian's observations. This one could have the X Factor, after all there's a line in here, "Watching TV on a Saturday Night, My Kind Of Paradise". I particularly enjoyed "Fly", which apparently was a last minute inclusion on the album. It has a really catchy beat, whilst "Lost In You" and "Memphis By Midnight" both have a softer beat to them. If you're aware of Brian's music, you'll know that he manages to blend Country & rock without losing the Country influence. It fits in nicely with today's American Country sounds, and he's right here in Scotland. www.brianhughesmusic.com



It's a well accepted fact that we only get to hear a small amount of the good Country music out there. There's so many Country music singers out there that never get the break. Well, here is a guy who should be up there with the hottest Nashville stars. He is from Virginia, and his name is **DAVID STATZER**. His album, "Until I Get It Down" (Three Hat Records) is



100% pure Country music. He apparently was inspired by Earl Thomas Conley, Waylon and Travis Tritt, but I detected influences of Haggard, Strait and even our own John Miller. Yes! Real Country music! The songs are originals, from the pens of Terry Dennis, Steve Saylor and Tim Johnson, amongst others. Between them, they've written hits for Diamond Rio, Jimmy Wayne, and Tracy Lawrence. The title cut kicks it all off, but track two really sets the tone. "I Refuse To Get The Blues" has shades of Ray Price as well as Merle, and has some really neat honky tonk piano. "My Baby And Me", "Out Of His Hands", and "I Know A Goodbye" are again heavily Haggard.

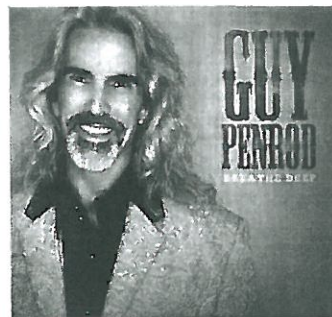
I really liked the up-tempo "Rocker Rolling On The Country Side", which brings a bit of rockabilly, Carl Perkins style, to the stage. He can certainly handle this type of song extremely well too. "Save The Wildlife", has more of an old time George Jones sound, but still sounding good. He slows the tempo for "Hold You To It" and "Me All Alone", and proves himself a fine balladeer as well. Great stuff.

From Ireland, let me introduce you to **ITA MAD-DEN**. Ita has a few CD's to her credit, and has worked the Irish club scene on both sides of the Irish sea, and worked as a DJ on Breffni Community Ra-

dio. Her latest album "Something For Everyone" (Anew Records), has quite a variety of material, from the standards like "Sea Of Heartbreak", "Old Love Letters" and "I'll Never Stop Loving You", to recent Country hits like Reba's "One Promise Too Late", Hal Ketchum's "Mama Knows The Highway", Josh Turner's "Firecracker" and Zac Brown Band's "Chicken Fried". She also covers Elizabeth Cook's "Sometimes It takes Balls To Be a Woman". She has completely changed this song. It wasn't a song that I thought would suit an Irish arrangement, but Ita does a great job. It's on the Irish arrangements that Ita really shines however. She covers "Roads To Kildare", "Tar & Cement" and "Make Sure You Love Me", and has a couple of traditional Irish sentimental songs, including her hit "A Single Working Mother" and "My Mothers Old Rosary Beads". Ita has a distinct Irish twang in her voice, which adds to her interpretations here.

GUY PENROD, the dominant voice of the famous Gaither Vocal Band for the last 14 years, has released his debut country CD release, **BREATHE DEEP**, produced by Brent Rowan (known for his work with Joe Nichols, Blake Shelton etc), on Servant Records. The first single release from the project, "Are You The One," is climbed to #1 on the New Christian Music Chart here and and #58 on the Billboard Country Chart. He has an uncanny resemblance to our own Charlie Landsborough, and whilst the vocal styling is different, Guy should appeal to Charlie fans.

Born in Abilene/Texas, the son of a preacher, Guy grew up singing in church and school. His first performance came at the age of three, and Penrod recalls his mom and dad standing him up on a folding chair for his debut solo, "Fill My Cup Lord". During the early 90s, Guy was an in-demand session singer in Nashville, who also appeared on TNN's "Music City Tonight" (as part of the show's vocal quartet), introducing him to a national audience via the live, 90-minute telecast. That led to The Gaithers, and the rest, as they say, is history.



The album contains 13 tracks, and whilst they all have a message in there, the casual listener could mistake it for a typical country album. It is very much a Nashville production. The single "Are You The One" is a particularly strong commercial song, yet has a message on the good influence one can have on others. "The World Goes Around" has a feel good tempo, and features some nice harmony, in a kinda Oakridge Boys style. "More Power To Ya" is a tribute to single working moms. Whilst "Nothin' More Beautiful Than That" is dedicated to survivors and recoverers. As far as gospel music goes, "The Maker Of Us All" is a

superb song, up-tempo and positive, and still with that Nashville sound.

Guy also softens the tempo on "The Broken Ones", honouring those who help others. It's a really beautiful number. I really enjoyed the album. Well worth checking out! To promote the album, he recently toured Northern Europe performing in six countries and a variety of venues, ranging from large theaters to intimate church settings. Although he didn't play any dates in mainland Britain, he did play Belfast, and really reaching out, he played two nights in The Faroes.

SARAH McCLURG is a new emerging name out of Canada. This good lookin' gal from Ottawa was



raised on Dylan, Gordon Lightfoot and Top 40 radio, and certainly has a driving beat throughout the ten tracks on her debut album, "Tennessee Rain", which she recorded in Nashville. The title track kicks the album into gear, and continues through titles like "Little More Highway" and "Out Of Nowhere", before declaring her Country roots with "Rodeo Girl".

She has some top notch musicians backing her up, including Al Perkins, Scotty Huff and Dave Roe. The title cut has already enjoyed a good bit of airplay in the UK, and been a great introduction to fans.

My favourite cuts would be the fast paced "Home Is Where You Are", and the two slower numbers, "Sunday Morning" and "Tumbleweed". The album is fast paced, and has a definite Country rock edge to it. But it works well. www.sarahmcclurg.com

Calgary based **SHANNON SMITH** is a new name to me, but she's certainly making an impression with her debut album, "Tell Me Something". She was the winner of Country 105 /Lammie's Rising Star Award last year, and has an impressive list of Festival appearances to her credit. The album, recorded in the Stampede City, features a number of songs written by Noah Gordon, who had a short recording career of his



own, as well as writing hits for John Michael Montgomery, amongst others. The album is quite poppy, but extremely well produced. It's ideal radio material for North American Country radio stations. "Better Luck In Vegas" is quite a catchy

number that worked well for me, whilst I enjoyed the solo ballad, "Cant Have My Heart". But there's two real crackers that stand out. "Over You By Now" is a

fast paced number, with a really cheeky tag line, "If I'd Only Met You Sooner, I'd Be Over You By Now". The other stand out number is "Take My Drunk I'm Home". It's another fast paced number, which excels at mixing up lines. It's a very cleverly written piece of work, and well performed by Shannon. As I said, it's a modern Country pop album, well produced, and a great debut offering.

www.shannonsmith.ca

LENNIE GALLANT is a well established singer songwriter across Canada. The P.E.I. native has recorded 9 albums to date, which blend folk, pop and Country. He has a host of Juno and East Coast Music Awards, and was inducted into The Order Of Canada. (Like our OBE). His latest album, "If We Had We a Fire" has a good mix of Country influenced Maritime music, all self written by Gallant. He has co-written a few of the songs, including "You Dont Know How Beautiful You Are" with fellow mara-timer Gordie Sampson (who is getting a few cuts in Nashville these days). The title track, a good driving



up-tempo number, was co-written by Carolyn Dawn Johnson, who also provides backing vocals. I really enjoyed this track. It should appeal to Country listeners, and cross-over too. "Before We Sell This Car" has some nice harmonica on the intro,

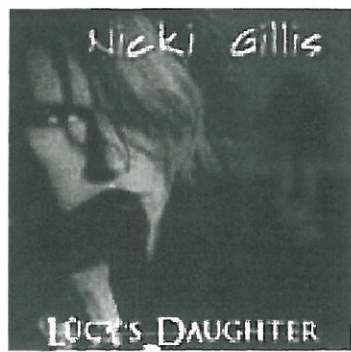
which leads into a song which remembers all the history that the vehicle holds. Another song which really works. "Emily's Letters" is a beautiful story of a dying aunt, whose secret was exposed on her death bed. He even has the Symphony Nova Scotia join in on "Extraordinary Ordinary Life" A good album which I enjoyed. www.lenniegallant.com

Now for something different, and if any group can have the most obvious title, it has to be Canada's **THE WESTERN SWING AUTHORITY**. In the classic style of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, and inspired by great bands like Asleep at the Wheel, this group really do recreate the sound that attracted

crowds to the dancehalls of Texas, Oklahoma and California in the 1930's and 40's, and has continued in popularity to present day. The seven members have all got impressive CV's having worked with top Canadian singers and group's. They offer 4 vocalists, Stacey Lee leading many of the tracks. The music is great, and the vocal arrangements just a joy to listen to. Amongst the songs they bring back to life, there's "Miles And Miles Of Texas", "Stay All Night", "All Of Me", "Cherokee Maiden" and "Faded Love". Great stuff. A joy to listen to.

Western Australia's **NICKI GILLIS** recently toured a variety of venues in the UK in support of her new

album, Lucy's Daughter" (Leap). She has had a couple of single releases, including the rather lightweight "Be a Star". Whilst that song is on the album, the other tracks prove Nicki to be much more of a talent



to be reckoned with. The lead off track, "Remember Me", was co-written by Nicki (as was half the tracks), and is a strong radio song. There a few cover songs that readers will recognize, including the Alan Jackson hit "A Little Bluer

Than That", Marianne Faithful's "Ballad Of Lucy Jordan", Annie Lennox', "Thorn In My Side", Nanci Griffith's "Once In A Very Blue Moon" and Trisha Yearwood's "Real Live Woman". She does a fair job on the covers, but it's the originals that best show Nicki's talents. "Leavin' You For Myself" is a shade on the rocky side, but I really enjoyed the fiddle intro and the simple acoustics of "Watch The Wildflowers Grow", and the softer "No One To Listen But The Wind", which displays Nicki's Aussie accent. I also enjoyed the "bonus track", "On The Mountain", which again was quite acoustic, with some neat banjo. All together, a very nice album. www.nickigillis.com.au

LITTLE BIG TOWN are one of the more distinctive groups in Nashville these days. Founded in 1998, the group has comprised the same four members since its inception: Karen Fairchild, Kimberly Schlapman, Jim Westbrook, and Phillip Sweet. The quartet's musical style relies heavily on four-part vocal harmonies, with



all four members alternating as lead singers. Westbrook and Sweet also play rhythm guitar. Their new album, (their fourth) "The Reason Why" was released on the Humphead label here in the UK at the end of August. It features

eleven tracks, with the biggest half of which were written by the band. Most of the tracks are fast paced numbers, with strong harmonies, best evident on songs like "All The Way Down" and "Why Oh Why". There are ballads too, like "Shut Up Train" and "Kiss Goodbye" which work well. My favourite track is the melodic, celtic influenced "You Cant Have Everything", which has lovely solo & harmont vocals, with a very simple musical arrangement, which kinda reminded me of The Rankins. I also enjoyed the soft "Lean Into It", with it's Eagles type harmonies, which closes the

album. "Little White Church", which has also been released here as a single, is a fast paced number, and has already been a huge crossover hit in the States. It's quite a catchy number, that should get a bit of airplay here too. The vocals are shared, both male & female, although the sleeve notes dont credit the lead vocalists. Their last album, "The Road To Here" was reissued at the same time as this album.

The **RANDY ROGERS BAND** are an Texan band, composed of Randy Rogers (lead vocals), Geoffrey Hill (guitar), Jon Richardson (bass guitar), Brady Black (fiddle), and Les Lawless (drums). They have recorded two live albums, and four studio albums, two of which went Top 10 on the Country album charts. But fans on this side of the Atlantic may be excused for not recognising them however, as their highest-charting single, "Tonight's Not the Night (For Goodbye)", only reached No 43 in 2005. So here we have a band, which are selling tons of albums, without mass radio play. Humphead have seen their potential, and have given their new album, "Burning The Day" a UK release just days after it hit US stores.

Having listened to the album, I cant determine why American radio haven't embraced them. Their sound has the same qualities that the airwaves there are full off. They are certainly up there with the Lonestar's and Rascal Flatts of Music City. The songs (all but three written, or co-written by Randy) are all well written and well produced. He has co-written with Dean Dillon, Bruce Robison and Sean McConnell.

"Missing You Is More Than I Can Do" and "Dont Tell Me The Truth", both melodic ballads, are the stand out tracks, although the more up-tempo, "Last Last Chance" also impressed me. He reminded me of Marty Stuart on this track. Altogether, for a group I hadn't heard off before, I enjoyed this album. Hopefully UK Country radio will give them more airplay than back in the US.

FIERY BLUE is an interesting name for a Country/Americana act, but that's exactly the name of this cross country group from New York, Austin and San Diego. New Yorker Simone Stevencis the lead vocalist, whilst Quinn Vogt-Welch, also from New York provides backing vocals. Texan Gabe Rhodes, the son



of Kimmie Rhodes who was here for Celtic Connections earlier in the year, produced the album, and plays a whole lot of instruments, whilst fellow Austin based Hunt Sales plays drums. The San Diego connection comes from Paul Marsteller, who is the songwriter of the quintet. Their self titled debut, just released at the end of September in the States (Doubloon Records), *continued on page 55...*

continued from page 46... offers no less than 18 tracks, all led vocally by Simone. The New Yorker has a really good vocal delivery, which suits Paul's songs, and are well supported by Gabe's production. It's not all Country. There's shades of pop. There's a bit of blues. Some of it's quite folksy, and other tracks soft rock. It's Americana, in the true sense of the label. It all blends together nicely, and is quite listenable.

I did particularly like the more up-tempo "Magic", probably the more Country track, with "Looking At You" close behind. It won't be everyone's cup of tea, but if you like the more Acoustic Singer-songwriter sounds, then this will certainly appeal to you.
www.fierblue.com

Grand Ole Opry member **CRAIG MORGAN** has been around Nashville for 10 years now, and had a number of impressive hits, including "That's What I Like About Sundays" and "Redneck Yacht Club".

His latest album, "That's Why" is a collectors edition released by Cracker Barrel (see separate feature), and features his recent Top 20 single, "This Aint Nothin'" and previous hits "Bonfire", "Love Remembers" and "God Must Really Love Me". There are two previously unreleased tracks, "You", and "Evil Knivel", both of which are quite uptempo. He co-wrote 5 of the 13 tracks. I particularly liked the title track, and the Toby Keith influenced "Sticks", both written by the Tennessee native. I also enjoyed the ballads, "It Took A Woman" and "Ordinary Angels". Of the modern Nashville stock, Craig is one of the strongest Country singers.



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MICHAEL RAY from Florida, is a new name to Country Music, but at the tender age of 21, he has a long future in the business assured. His self titled debut album (CNE Entertainment) has been given a UK release through Smart Choice Music (www.smartchoicemusic.com), and should win over an army of fans with the dozen original songs contained on the CD. Michael co-wrote half of the album. There's a lot of Tim McGraw in his style of music. It's modern, but still heartfelt Country. Ballads include the soft "23rd Psalm", which isn't out of the hymnary, "Why Did You Say Yes", and the lovely "She Doesn't Know That Yet". In the main, however, the tempo is more upbeat, especially on tracks like "One Life",

"Aint That Just Like A Woman" and "I Am Who I Am". My favourites would be "The Good Ole Days", the more traditional "Too Country", and "She's My Everything". The project was produced by Austin producer Dwight Baker, who also contributed to the writing of the songs. Baker's previously produced Kelly Clarkson, amongst others, so has good credentials. I really enjoyed the album, and look forward to hearing more from Michael in the future.

Some readers may recognize the music of **THE WRIGHTS**. They are the married duo of Adam & Shannon Wright, who released their first album on Adam's uncle's label. The uncle in question, Alan Jackson, also took the duo out on the road with him. Their third album, "Red And Yellow, Blue And Green" (Tour Records) has just been released here. Their harmonies really stand out, and the acoustics are quite stunning. It's kinda like The Everly's meet The Beach Boys at times. At other times, the tempo is quite haunting. Adam does most of the lead vocals, although Shannon takes the lead on two tracks, "I Cry" and "Miles For You", which I really liked. It's the numbers with a strumming guitar that caught my attention though. Tracks like "Flying Home" and "We'll All Drink Money". An interesting album. They have an intriguing sound, that may take a few listens to get into.



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Finally, **THE KINGMAKERS** are a Canadian authentic rock'n'roll group featuring Clark Lawlor on the Shure 55S (the "Elvis mic"), John Cormier on the electric twang box, Steve Donnelly on the doghouse bass and Pinstripe Bobby on the machine-gun drums. They certainly capture not just the music but the raw energy of the era, where showmanship was key and songs were short and to the point. For this album, they headed to Nashville, recorded the album in Jack Clements studio, and roped in J.M Van Eaton and The Jordanaires to add some magic. The result is "Last Night in Nashville". There's 12 original tracks, and two alternative versions, and your feet won't stop tapping all the way through. It's an "as it happens" album, with some of the tracks preceded by studio chatter (no editing here). It adds to the authenticity. I particularly liked "Saturday Night", "Annabelle" and the Cajun flavoured "Women & Weather". It's certainly different. I enjoyed the beat.

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