



Web only column:

Riffs

By Ron Wynn, rwynn@nashvillecitypaper.com

June 18, 2004

The late Johnny Paycheck's "Take This Job and Shove It" was the type of universal, transcendent song that immediately resounded with anyone ever mistreated by tyrannical bosses or upset by unfair labor situations. It made him a folk hero, but those who'd heard and enjoyed his work before and after also knew he was an outstanding hard country and honky-tonk stylist long before that number earned him rare crossover attention. Paycheck (he changed the spelling of his last name to PayCheck near the end of his life) was a real character whose personality, brashness and sense of adventure sometimes overruled and trumped his good judgment. However, he also made several wonderful tunes, many of which were classic country numbers. Several are featured on an outstanding new anthology *The Little Darlin' Sound of Johnny Paycheck: The Beginning* (Koch/Audium). This is the first in a prospective series highlighting vintage material he cut for Aubrey Mayhew's great Little Darlin' label, much of it previously unissued.



Only the first two cuts from the Paycheck sessions have been previously available, the songs "Don't Start Countin' On Me" and "The Girl They Talk About." The amazing thing about all 15 songs, which were done in mono, is the strong, confident and powerful quality in Paycheck's voice. George Jones (who served as a duet partner on a couple of cuts) and Merle Haggard are among many performers who have publicly praised Paycheck's talent. You can clearly hear in the phrasing and style on such songs as "I'm Glad To Have Her Back Again," "Don't You Get Lonesome" and "Shackles and Chains" how Jones and Paycheck influenced each other.

Whether doing somber fare like "Beyond The Last Mile" or sweeping heartache numbers such as "High Heels and No Soul" or "When You're Tired of Breaking Their Heart," Paycheck's skills as a striking storyteller and brilliant singer emerges on every song. There's reportedly more than 500 Paycheck numbers in the catalog, so there should be more volumes coming down the line. Hopefully, they'll all be as good as the initial entry in the series.

More country

It speaks volumes about the condition of current Nashville affairs that an artist as skilled and acclaimed as James Talley has been making his living mainly in real estate rather than music for many years. *Journey* (Cimarron) gathers 14 songs recorded live in Italy during October 2002. Five of them have never been available, and the entire session wasn't originally released in America. The new material includes a marvelous piece "The Song of Chief Joseph" that isn't so much protest as it is a matter-of-fact recitation regarding the injustices done to Native Americans. By contrast, "My Cherokee Maiden" is just a fine love tune. Talley's tunes cover such issues as infidelity, isolation, pain and suffering, but he can also write effective light-hearted fare along with sentimental tribute songs like "Sometimes I Think About Suzanne." Until some domestic label gets the good sense to sign him, fans must content themselves with imports and occasional domestic items like *Journey*. Those who can't find it in stores can contact him directly via Cimarron at P.O. Box 120722, Nashville, 37212.

Because she looks like a fashion model, there's some suspicion that Julie Roberts self-titled Mercury debut represents the second coming of Faith Hill. While Hill is a master at what she does, Roberts' role models aren't coming from that school. Her delivery, manner, style and sound may not be hardcore hillbilly, but she's not doing creamy pop either. She's found a good middle ground musically, retaining a traditional lyric sensibility but modifying it slightly through the arrangements on such tunes as "Break Down Here," "The Chance" and "Pot of Gold." But the opening stanza of the disc's first number "You Ain't Down Home" clearly signals Roberts' direction, while other strong

outings "Rain On A Tin Roof," "I Can't Get Over You" and "Wake Up Older" provide the final proof where her heart lies.

Folk/bluegrass

Better known as a stirring traditional Irish vocalist, Maura O'Connell shifts gears into folk, bluegrass and light country on *Don't I Know* (Sugar Hill). Ace instrumentalist Jerry Douglas produced the session, and O'Connell slightly cuts back the dynamics without losing any fire or clarity on 11 tunes ranging from the sentimental ("Trip Around The Sun") to the celebratory ("Love You In The Middle") to the depressing ("There's No Good Day For Dying"). While such fine players as bassist Edgar Meyer, guitarist Bryan Sutton and keyboardist Gabe Dixon lend a hand on various numbers, Maura O'Connell makes *Don't I Know* a fine change-of-pace work, though one that doesn't quite generate the fireworks of her usual releases.

Stanley Brothers Earliest Recordings: The Complete Rich-R-Tone 78s 1947-1952 (Rich-R-Tone) has the sonically rough, vocally raw quality expected from a CD featuring the very first recordings cut by Carter and Ralph Stanley. But what's even more invigorating about these cuts is how vibrant and youthful both Carter and Ralph sounded then. These 14 songs were recorded in Johnson City, and the group was also undergoing transitions. On the first four numbers, Leslie Keith handled fiddle duties, with Pee Wee Lambert's prickling mandolin heard alongside Carter Stanley's guitar and Ralph Stanley's banjo. By the second session, they were down to a quartet, and these songs have a leaner, lighter sound due to the absence of any bass on the bottom. The same was true for the last two sessions, although Jim Williams replaced Lambert for the last numbers and Art Stamper was now the fiddler. The Stanley's harmonies are sometimes more piercing and memorable than the leads, because each was still establishing a style. But while these are clearly foundation cuts, they remain quite valuable as they document the start of what became a legendary bluegrass unit.

Reggae/African/world

Winston Rodney AKA Burning Spear grew up in the same parish in Jamaica as Bob Marley, and was later introduced to the influential producer Coxsone Dodd by Marley. While nowhere as magnetic a live performer or inspirational writer, Burning Spear quickly forged his own place in reggae circles, establishing himself as a fiery singer and above-average composer determined to use reggae as a forum for both heartfelt protest tunes and deeply spiritual testimonials. Today Spear heads his own label and continues making what he calls "truth and rights" music in the classic '70s fashion. His latest release *Rasta Business* (Burning Music Productions) includes strong Afrocentric anthems like "Africa" and "Every Other Nation" mixed in with religious and praise pieces such as "Hello Rastaman," "Creation" and the title track. Though he doesn't condemn or attack any of the dancehall generation, for Burning Spear, cutting pop-flavored reggae or deserting the socio-political trail isn't an option.

Miriam Makeba's been a star on the international circuit even longer than Burning Spear. She's divided her time between singing highlife, township, jazz, folk and pop numbers and being an anti-apartheid fighter and political activist since the '50s. Though banned from the airwaves in her native South Africa for decades, Makeba won a Grammy award with Harry Belafonte for a joint project during the '60s, and she's endured to see her homeland freed and her accomplishments celebrated around the world. *Reflections* (Heads Up) serves a career retrospective for the singer whose voice remains able to clearly and fully hit high notes, scat, work with or against rhythms, and function in many genres. Makeba's menu includes Brazilian compositions, African pieces and both French and English tunes, every one done masterfully. The selections also feature updated versions of two big Makeba hits, "Pata Pata" and "The Click Song," as well as surprise renditions of such songs as "I'm In Love With Spring," "Ring Bell" and "Love Tastes Like Strawberries."

P.O.D. (Real World) highlights remixes and of past hits by international music's reigning fusion masters. Arguably the best tracks are "Further In Time," which has a brighter, more bass-dominated sound here, as well as "Riding The Skies," "Lagan" and "Persistence of Memory." The Afro Celts have also included in this package a bonus DVD with the videos from "Persistence of Memory" and "When You're Falling," plus edited highlights from their 2001 appearance at Womad and a 5.1 surround version of "North" that's aurally spectacular, but musically less distinguished. Frankly, much of this sounded less busy and more intense in the original versions. Here, there so much focus on juicing up the rhythms and tinkering with the arrangements that sometimes the

group's energetic union of European melody and African rhythm gets compromised in the process.

Real Blues

While best known for bawdy novelty numbers and sizzling live stage show, Bobby Rush began his career doing traditional Delta blues and country-soul tunes. That's the focus of his newest release *Folk Funk* (Deep Rush). Although he does include a updated rendition of "Chicken Heads-Refried," Rush cuts back on the comedy and innuendo, but doesn't let playing it straight limit his approach. He's alternately topical and reflective, poignant, assertive and demonstrative during his vocals on "River's Invitation," "Voodoo Man," and "Feeling Good, Parts 1 & 2." His harmonica playing makes an effective counterpoint for the leads, though he's not exactly a dazzling stylist. Still, Rush demonstrates on *Folk Funk* that he doesn't always have to be jovial or outrageous to be a credible, enjoyable blues performer.

Mule spotlighting grinding blues and mournful vocals from Mississippi guitarist Paul "Wine" Jones was produced in 1995 by the late outstanding journalist and musician Robert Palmer. It was cut for the Fat Possum label, but has recently been reissued by Capricorn. The material ranges from scathing chronicles such as "Bad Times in Mississippi" and "Mad Dog on My Trail" to lighter items like "Kitty Kat" and "Diggin' Mommas Tatters." Jones has equal parts country, blues and soul in his voice, and delivers the tunes in a weary, agonizing yet also appealing fashion. As with many Fat Possum acts, there's times when it seems Jones was going one way and the backing band another, but their ability to make these rhythmic adventures work is part of the disc's charm, as well as its raw sonic quality.

Guitarist/vocalist Kenny Brown's stark, animated singing is the highlight of *Stingray* (Fat Possum), an erratic but often charming contemporary blues item. The really good pieces, especially "Goin' Down South," "Cocaine Bill" and "Brought You To The City," reconfigure the traditional sound in a fresher, more vibrant fashion. The lesser tunes, especially a rather disappointing rendition of "Shake Em' On Down" sound like humdrum exercises, attempts at demonstrating a knowledge of the blues canon that instead reduces great songs into tedious exercises. Brown has the kind of sharp, edgy voice and experience that would be better served at this point by either cutting all original material or perhaps experimenting with some modern genres and elements. *Stingray* is often quite enticing, but sometimes it also sounds a bit dated.

Vocal jazz

Johnny Holiday somehow got lost in the jazz underground decades ago, despite having the sort of luminous voice and presence that should have made him a rival for Billy Eckstine or Arthur Prysock. Instead, he never had a breakthrough record, spending many years toiling in the ancillary end of the music business while battling to achieve some degree of recognition. While this CD *Johnny Holiday Sings* (Contemporary) still probably won't greatly expand his audience, it does show that he did deserve a break many years ago. The first 13 tunes were produced by vibist Terry Gibbs for a 1998 album, and they feature Holiday's gleaming, triumphant versions of "Stardust," "It's A Blue World," and "Day By Day" among others. The final seven tunes are the complete output from a 1954 date co-produced by Holiday and Dick Bock for a 10-inch Pacifica LP *Johnny Holiday Sings*. Aside from having a little smoother and bit fuller sound, there's not that much difference between these sessions. Holiday has a breezy, polished, but not stiff style, swings with ease and can be impressive even on shopworn standards or period-piece fluff. Hopefully, this new CD will at least get his name back out in the marketplace, as he's certainly an excellent vocalist.

Nancy Wilson had already become a major star among fans of jazz and jazz-based pop music when she cut *Something Wonderful* (Capitol/Blue Note) in 1960. The new reissued version doesn't have any bonus cuts, but does have a clean, immaculate sound thanks to 24-bit remastering. Wilson's shimmering delivery was ideal for the likes of "Teach Me Tonight," "What A Little Moonlight Can Do," and "If Dreams Come True" among others, while the backing group included the robust tenor sax solos of Ben Webster and Shelly Manne's sensitive drumming as instrumental fulcrums. Despite not having any song longer than three-and-half minutes, Wilson and company still found ways to tweak, adjust and subtly rework these songs, with Webster especially delivering forceful, if short, solos that fortified Wilson's leads and treatments. Billy May's arrangements also nicely balanced Wilson's singing and the quartet's musical attributes, with guitarist Jack Marshall emerging as a first-rate second soloist and even better accompanist. May's orchestrations were never intrusive, and also perfectly designed to enhance or complement the singer, soloist and/or quartet. Only

Nelson Riddle among the arranger/conductors of that era rivaled May in understanding how to balance jazz and symphonic concerns within the same setting.

Recent surveys

Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You" tops the Country Music Television (CMT) list of the 100 Greatest Love Songs. Parton's version also topped country charts in 1971, then 18 years later headed the pop charts thanks to Whitney Houston. Willie Nelson's "You Were Always On My Mind," came in second, followed by Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams." The rest of the top 10 were Randy Travis' "Forever and Ever, Amen," Conway Twitty's "Hello Darlin'," Garth Brooks' "Unanswered Prayers," Lonestar's "Amazed," Kenny Rogers' "She Believes In Me," George Strait's "I Cross My Heart," and the George Jones/Tammy Wynette duet "Golden Ring." A two-hour concert featuring these tunes and a four-hour documentary about all the songs aired June 13 on CMT.

The latest *Rolling Stone* 50th Anniversary of Rock special issue (June 24th date) spotlights "50 Moments That Changed The Course of Rock & Roll." As with all this type of material, personal enjoyment hinges on how much you accept both the magazine's definition of what constitutes rock 'n' roll and whether you buy the notion that Elvis Presley invented rock in Sam Phillips studio. But that aside, the issue's quite entertaining with its inclusion of vintage covers and look back at events ranging from the '50s to the present.

Label bloodletting

Even in today's bottom-line rules environment labels don't drop half their roster every day. But that is exactly what the new corporate rulers at the Warner Music Group supposedly plan to do according to an article in that same issue of *Rolling Stone*. While *Stone*'s critical value hasn't been worth much for decades, they've become a highly reliable source for industry news and developments. Jenny Eliscu's story includes this nugget from label head Lyor Cohen: "Artists deserve a deep commitment from their labels. If that commitment doesn't exist, they should be given the freedom to pursue it elsewhere. The goal is to nurture artistic creativity and create successful careers."

That sounds good, until you start carefully reading the story. For example, Stereolab, who had been with Elektra since 1993, are in trouble for selling only 40,000 copies of *Margarine Eclipse*. Likewise, Third Eye Blind didn't reach the gold level for *Out of the Vein* and The Breeders *Title TK* only moved 45,000 units. It seems that unless bands hit the multi-million level every time out they'll be toast on a major label.

But what's really happening is that more and more groups are seeing that the traditional record industry model, at least in terms of the "majors," has become unworkable for all but a slim percentage of performers and bands in the industry.

Meanwhile, if the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) has its way, eventually fans won't even be able to tape shows off the radio. The RIAA is now lobbying with the FCC to put copyright protection devices into digital radio technology. Thus far, owners of either XM or Sirius can tape shows without worry, but the RIAA wants to make it impossible for future owners of digital radio to copy a song off the air and redistribute it on the Internet or download it to removable media. A June 9 article in the *Hollywood Reporter* said that RIAA CEO and chairman Mitch Bainwol was planning to argue for implementation of this technology in forthcoming digital radio receivers and that the organization would formally press for this in final comments on the issue before the FCC on June 16.

While piracy is detestable and those who indulge in it should be punished to the full extent of the law, many music fans tape radio shows solely for personal enjoyment and fulfillment. As someone with hours and hours of taped radio shows going back years that are now popping out of closets and boxes, my sole purpose in doing this is to listen to great radio programs more than once, as well as to hear shows at later dates. The hundreds of fans who purchase digital technology so they can better appreciate music shouldn't be lumped in with profiteers selling bootleg CDs and horrible copies of DVDs on the street.

R.I.P.

Robert Quine and Steve Lacy frequently confounded audience expectations while simultaneously inspiring everyone around them with their unique abilities and approaches. They didn't play similar music, as Quine was a punk-rocker and Lacy an outside jazz experimenter, but they shared a disdain for pretentiousness and the skill to radically expand the possibilities for players on their instruments.

Quine, who died June 9 at 61 in New York City, was famous for wearing button-down shirts and sports coats in a setting where anything went clothes wise from ripped jeans to bare torsos. But his guitar work quickly astonished everyone who heard it when he debuted on the 1977 *Blank Generation* with Richard Hell and The Voidoids. He was the perfect partner for Lou Reed, and also worked with Matthew Sweet and Lloyd Cole among others. He was also heard on hit albums by Marianne Faithfull and Tom Waits. Quine may have been the only great punk-rock guitarist attorney, having earned a law degree from Washington University in St. Louis.

Though Lacy, who died June 8 at 69 in Boston, became famous for his twisting, eerie-sounding soprano sax solos, he was also a great traditional jazz player. He was a disciple of Sidney Bechet, and his early sessions were done in the collective New Orleans style. But when he met pianist Cecil Taylor, Lacy's interests were permanently changed. Lacy's playing included shrieks, screams and other vocal effects, as well as remarkably lengthy lines frequently executed at amazing speeds. He was able to stay in tune in both the extreme upper and lower registers of the soprano, something that still confounds contemporary players. He also helped popularize the soprano to the point that John Coltrane supposedly consulted him before deciding to record "My Favorite Things" in 1960. Lacy also became an authority on the compositions of pianists Thelonius Monk and Herbie Nichols, and recorded numerous monster avant-garde sessions for European and independent labels from the 1960s into the 21st century.

- Read this article online:

http://www.NashvilleCityPaper.com/index.cfm?section=12&screen=news&news_id=33883

Copyright 2000-2004, The City Paper LLC.