

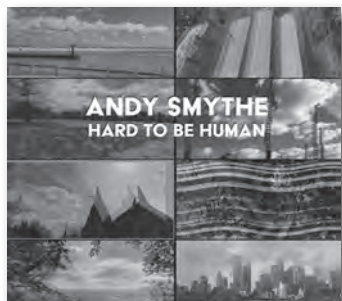
ago and was mightily impressed, and their first full album's simply a cracking release, one that draws on those great days of the British Blues Boom of the '60's. The musicianship is excellent, the band are tight and clearly playing live has sharpened their sound.

Formed in 2013 as a duo featuring Nick Scrase on guitar and vocals and Eduardo Allen on harmonica, by the following year they'd added the rhythm section of Tom Turner on drums and bassist Andy Wood. From there, the band has gigged and honed itself into one of Bristol's finest - brilliantly summed up in their 'North Street Blues' ("My home is in Bristol, North Sea Road") - as they say, bringing it all back home.

From the tasty Delta slide courtesy of Nick on 'My Malaise', to the good, old-time blues of the foot-tapper 'Get Along', the Texas shuffle of 'Ain't Had No Loving',

or the boogie of 'The Ballad Of Ragtime Texas', there's a welcome variety of styles on show. If you like the barrelhouse, the gritty Delta blues that went to Chicago, or the laid back style of the Mississippi Delta, then there's more than enough to keep any blues fan happy. From the opening 'Highway 61' to the closing, atmospheric blues of 'The Lonesome Crow', this is an album that should see the band gain a whole new fan base. A band playing real blues and a fantastic debut of an album.

Pete Clack



Andy Smythe: Hard To Be Human

Dreaming Element Records

Andy Smythe incorporates big ideas and his own outlook onto a record that hears him cover a lot of ground. His roots in Greenwich, in London, are on understated

display throughout. He is an engaging lyricist and his original way of taking on his subject matter is one of his most prominent calling cards. One example of this is 'Love's My Saviour', where he talks about how love can overtake your physical being in rather literal and descriptive terms. On 'Hard To Be Human' itself, he repeats the title almost like an incantation but reaches into areas that most songwriters would not think to explore with brevity and thoroughness. Smythe plays all the musical instruments himself and his dreamy accompaniment to 'It's Not Real' has a mysterious and mobile edge. The record is not really folk or blues, it's more in line with English singer-songwriters. His voice is the most remarkable element of the album and he wisely retains his natural tone, evading the trap of adopting a mock American dialect and instead reaching every note of his real-life melodies with great aplomb. Even on 'San Francisco II' then, he records the memorable chorus with the embodiment of a London observer rather than a native of that famous city.

David Robinson (aka The Cold Heart Revue)



Hans Theesink & Big Daddy Wilson: Pay Day

Blue Groove

Dutch singer/ guitarist/ multi-instrumentalist and songwriter Hans Theesink has been making excellent blues and roots records since the early '80s. Seized by the blues after hearing Big Bill Broonzy on late night radio, he has played with many of the music's greats, and the albums he made with the late singer/ guitarist Terry Evans (a familiar name to Ry Cooder

fans) are real highlights of his discography. Now, I'm not about to suggest that in working with the Germany-based American ex-pat singer Big Daddy Wilson, he is in any way trying to recreate those marvellous musical moments, but in truth, this album does present more marvellous musical moments, though Big Daddy is a different kind of blues singer than Terry.

These sixteen tracks are real duets. They draw from gospel, as with the opener, Blind Willie Johnson's 'Everybody Ought To Treat A Stranger Right', and Washington Phillips' 'Denomination Blues', to blues such as Mississippi John Hurt for the lovely title track and Skip James' 'Hard Time Killing Floor', with the originals by both men fitting seamlessly into the same kind of approach. Lend an ear to the closing 'Train' and 'Roll With Punches', for a couple of good examples, or the folky compositions like Wilson's 'Little Nora Maj' and 'Ballerina' and Hans' reflective 'Vintage Red Wine'. 'Virus Blues' will probably be included in some blues writer's article on songs about the 2020 pandemic in years to come. This is a lovely, quiet and thoughtful album by two masters of their bluesy craft.

Norman Darwin



Geoff Carne & The Raw Rox Band: The Love Gun EP

Own Label

This EP release has 'Love Gun' as the opening track and the jaunty rhythmic piece has a full group backing. There is an angular nature to the material overall and an edginess to the record. The next track 'Beautiful' has a rocking

guitar riff that is the bedrock of the song and there is a real swagger to the slinky momentum that the band makes. They also have a more acoustic role on 'Love Gun' that sees the fingerpicking pattern delivered confidently by Arby 'Slash' Rockman. 'It's Killing Me' has a more rolling foreboding accompaniment with a haunting vocal melody. It is re-worked as the last track on the record in a keyboard arrangement that places Bob Calvert's as the main instrument to work with the lead singer.

David Robinson (aka The Cold Heart Revue)



Prakash Slim: Country Blues From Nepal

DeVille

This isn't Mississippi Hill Country blues but it's definitely mountain country - Lalitpur in Nepal - and this rather fine album demonstrates that the blues these days is certainly an international language. Ram Prakash "Slim" Pokharel is a singer and guitarist with a love for the sound of vintage Mississippi blues which he plays very well - expect to hear echoes of Charley Patton, Big Joe Williams, Furry Lewis and particularly Robert Johnson in the guitar work - and although there is the occasional tinge of an accent in his singing, his vocals are just fine. He is also happy to compose his own fusion material, though perhaps that is too strong a description: the opening number is 'Blues Raga', but it sounds more like a Mississippi blues to me. 'Villager's Blues' and 'Poor Boy' are presumably autobiographical and 'Bhariya Blues', a 1920s Memphis-flavoured accompaniment with slide guitar and the closing 'Garib

Keto', are both sung in Nepali, as Slim informs me – the latter is a version of 'Poor Boy'. Of the borrowed material, you will find covers of Mississippi Fred McDowell's 'You Gotta Move', Bukka White's 'Jitterbug Swing' and atypically for this release (as there's no Mississippi connection), Blind Blake's 'Police Dog Blues', alongside Johnson and Patton – listen to the way he slaps the strings against the frets on the top-notch cover of the latter's 'Moon Going Down'. Three tracks feature some fine harp playing by the Italian Fabrizio Poggi, underlining the international nature of this release. Oh, and it was recorded in Nepal, mixed and produced in France and mastered in Luxemburg – and this very entertaining release was certainly worth the effort.

Norman Darwen



The Aiken Rail Band: Back From The Blues

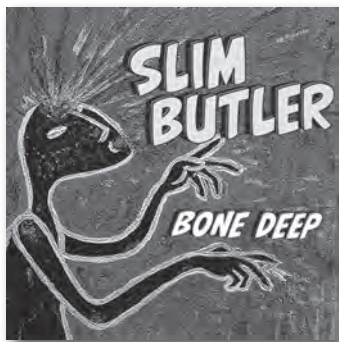
Own Label

Hailing out of the heart of the Mississippi delta comes Hal Aiken, born in Greenwood, and to me a new name. A trip to the wonderfully named Snapper Hood Studios in Destin, Florida produced these tasty nine tracks of very listenable blues. From the opening title track 'Back From The Blues' to the closing 'Blues So Bad' the Aiken Rail Band presents a journey through the blues in all its variations and colours. Hal Aiken spent many years working for Peavey Electronics before forming his band, and instead of doing things for others, set about building his own musical reputation. On this showing he's done it very nicely indeed. Not a rock heavy album but more in the vein of Dion, a slightly edgy

voice but soulful, with a band that never overtake the frontman. It's a totally self-written album, and Hal sure knows how to put down a solid blues like 'Broken Hearted Man', which features some nice piano from 'Pip' Pippin alongside Hal's guitar fills.

The whole album is very well produced: the sound is clear and has a live feel to it. This is clearly a band full of experienced musicians doing what they do best, offering some great modern blues with an original touch.

Pete Clack



Slim Butler: Bone Deep

Slimcuts

Slim Butler hail from Finland and this is their fourth album since their recorded debut in 2012. Frontman, Jarmo Puhakka (guitar and lead vocals) leads his recording and touring band The Slim Cuts, comprising guitarist Harri Randaskoski, bassist Mikko Lytty and drummer Jartsa Karvonen, all of whom are sought-after session musicians in their homeland. A further measure of their status is that they represented Finland at the 2018 European Blues Challenge and the 2019 International Blues Challenge in Memphis.

The band's stated influences give a good idea of the material on this album and it doesn't disappoint in that regard. The opening 'Ain't No Excuse' is Hendrix-driven from the off; throbbing wah-wah guitar, vocals and guitar playing the melody in tandem and a solo whereby the tone and feel is pure 'Dolly Dagger'. 'Gots To Pay' follows with a riff that owes a little to Stevie Ray Vaughan before settling

into a funky groove and a nicely measured solo in the style of Rory Gallagher. 'Roll And Tumble' changes the mood with its rolling New Orleans vibe and with deft slide lines before 'How Deep Is The Water' – the Allman Brothers feel – solid bass and drums foundations, over which there are some nice "mid-pick up setting" Stratocaster solo lines. 'Darkest Night' is a straight-ahead Texas shuffle, followed by 'Blues Done Left Me', which (as the name suggests) is a slow, low-down 12-bar blues, laden with T-Bone Walker chords before building to a big guitar solo ending. 'Slim On Ice' is a Latin rhythm instrumental, complete with Santana style percussion – sounds a bit of a jam number but done to good effect – and 'Quarter Past Four' returns to funkier ground with nice chord changes along the way. A complete change of mood arrives with 'C'est La Vie', comprising acoustic guitars and a guest bandoneon (a type of accordion) player – the absence of overdrive and other studio effects provides confirmation that these guys really are top players. The final track 'Why Don'tcha' turns down the country rock path and bounces along with some impressive vocal harmonies and country style guitar fills.

My one criticism is that the running order feels like an album front-loaded with harder blues-rock numbers before giving way to an assortment of different styles: mixing the songs up a little more might have made for a smoother ride. That reservation aside, this is a solid set that deserves a wider audience.

Russ Cottee

Stephen Doster: Over The Red Sea

F.A.W. Records

Stephen Doster's music certainly falls into the Americana category, but like the best Americana, it is rootsy and yes, at times bluesy. This is his third album, and he takes travel as a general theme, from the Horn of Africa to London, on to Dublin and Belfast, and across the pond



to Virginia and Mississippi before ending up at his Texas home. He has the backing of a variety of nicely subtle musicians.

Some tracks give an idea of Stephen's experience. There is a dedication to Nanci Griffith for whom Doster worked as guitarist early in her career, and another to Dr. John, who recorded Stephen's song 'Baby There's No One Like You' with Willie Nelson in 2002. (Albert Cummings has recorded material by Doster too, and he produced John Mayall's current guitarist Carolyn Wonderland). 'Anything Could Happen' leans towards the country-rock sound of the '70s, whilst the opener is, in contrast, quite doomy. 'The Singing Bus Driver' is the one that refers to Dublin and Belfast, and of course, has strong elements of Irish folk, whilst 'A Better World', the catchy 'Who's Crying Now' and 'Blue Heron' are singer/songwriter styled, with the latter reminding me of Ry Cooder in the guitar work at times. 'The Sweet Life' has slightly tougher tone and the politically-slanted 'Magdalena Spoke' is tougher still. A title like 'The Rooster Crows', suggests a blues perhaps and, although not a straight blues, there is a strong tinge to both the vocals and guitar work. The closing 'Black Cat's Stroll' is a virtuoso but mellow guitar piece that any acoustic blues guitarist would be proud of, a rather nice way to finish off this rather interesting release.

Norman Darwen

Bob Stroger & The Headcutters: That's My Name
Delmark

Although they may not recognise the name, every blues fan will own recordings by Bob Stroger who has played bass with