

Reviewing the best in non-mainstream acoustic guitar music

March/April, 2009

Tony McManus, "The Maker's Mark: The Dream Guitar Sessions," Compass Records, 2009



This CD features great tunes, expertly played on some of the finest acoustic guitars available today, all from North Carolina's Dream Guitars shop. Tony McManus is perhaps the most technically and intellectually gifted Celtic-based guitarist currently recording and performing, and "Maker's Mark" meets the high standards of his earlier solo albums and breaks some new ground as well. He begins with a set of pipe and fiddle tunes, "Inveran / The Devil in the Kitchen / Locheil's Away to France", displaying the technique and speed that account for much of his appeal. A medley of "Donal Óg" and "The Lea Rig" follows, showing McManus' skill in rendering beautiful melodies. There are no weak selections here, but several others are worth mentioning for the variety each lends the program. McManus plays "Chalaneru" on a nylon-string guitar built by Paul McGill (a novelty of sorts, since he favors steel-

stringed instruments). Several baritone guitars make an appearance, on Monteverdi's "Si Dolce è'l Tormento", "Nikosi Sikelele" (the South African national anthem) and Donald Lunney's "Coast River". Another medley, "Doina / Parov's Daichevo" is played on a sitar-guitar built by Linda Manzer, which is closely miked in order to capture the dynamics of this delicate instrument. McManus' arrangement of "The Maids of Mitchelstown" would have fit well alongside other Celtic tunes on John Renbourn's mid-1980s album, *The Nine Maidens*. He plays "Reel de la Sauvagine" with both flatpick and fingers (without overdubbing). The closing selection, Andre Marchand's "Valse des Bélugas", is multitracked and has McManus playing all of the guitars used on the session (and a mandolin). Since all but this closing track are solo performances, the sound on "The Maker's Mark" is a bit more intimate than McManus' previous solo recordings. His mastery of the broad range of material on the disc indicates continued artistic growth, and leads me to expect more variety to come. It's arguably his best album to date, and that's saying something.

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EXCLUSIVE!

[Patrick Ragains interviews Tony McManus!! - click here](#)

Brian Vander Ark, Second Motion Records, 2008

Brian Vander Ark, founding member of Michigan's Verve Pipe, "used to be a big star, depending on who you ask." This disk chronicles his post fifteen minutes, post 9/11 search for America and his place in it. The brief opening instrumental -- an uncommon choice -- sends a message. The music comes first, and it's not Verve Pipe music. In landscapes from folk to orchestral rock the arrangements sound gorgeously lush, even played by very few instruments. Listen to the interplay in "We heard, We Saw" between Vander Ark's acoustic and Bob Pelander's piano. (His keyboard work is a sumptuous highlight throughout.) "And Then We Fell" follows, a sequel to Paul Simon's "America." (Check out Vander Ark's Garfunkadelic harmony on "driving in circles and circles.") It's as if the escaped lovers of "The Graduate" find themselves at the end of the road. They "were flirting with Canada." But when they see the "glorious peaks of Montana," he knows "this is America." "I Went with the Road" uses Steuart Smith's National Steel and electric guitars to support this southern-fried recollection of temptation and a rocker with his life "in a downhill skid." "Lily White Way" depicts a Midwest Penny Lane of a neighborhood with "every third house a pool, every second a gun." "Optimism's Glow," a pretty, straight-ahead, pop-sheened love song has something to say. "Evangeline," another lovely melody, finds the aging rocker uncomfortably dispensing parental advice: "Being good's all you can do, but sometimes bad is okay too." Smith's slide drives the album's rock-most tune in which the singer finds himself "Fit to Be Tied" down. Smith shreds "Love So True," to help Vander Ark's exorcism. "That devil's deceased," he insists. "I will leave him behind." "Monday Morning Girl" is a declaration of love and acceptance. "We were Never the Same," a paean to 21st Century America, brings matters full circle. The album is suitably titled. Its beautiful tunes paint a compelling self-portrait of the artist coming to terms with his place and his homeplace.

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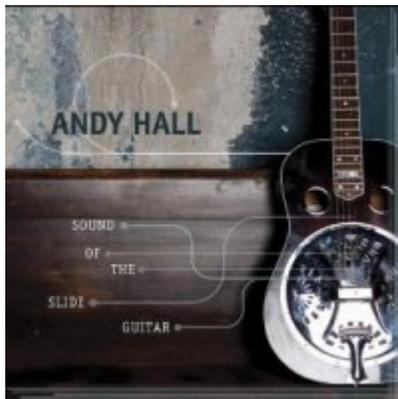
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Andy Hall, "Sound of the Slide Guitar," Sugarhill Records, 2008



From the breathless romp of "The Chase" to the reflective "Always You" to the pedal-to-the-metal of "Velocity", slide guitarist extraordinaire Andy Hall revels in his collection of rich-toned music-makers: a mahogany Meredith resonator, a koa Harper resonator, a 1929 National square neck tri-cone, a Bear Creek Hawaiian. It's a heady mix, but Hall, a graduate of the Berklee College of Music, keeps his fleet fingers near the of traditional bluegrass throughout his second solo collection. An agreeable vocalist as well, Hall presents these 11 tracks, eight of which he penned himself, with the consummate skill of a professional without sacrificing any of the joy of the genre. And nowhere is that more evident than on the rollicking "C-BOPS (Special Ops)." Hall enlists his talented friends for a classic treatment treatment on "Deep Elem Blues," with Hall's upbeat lead vocals upfront. Jeremy Garrett on fiddle, Jesse

Cobb on mandolin and Chris Pandolfi on banjo hit on all cylinders on this one. When it comes to emotion and transcendancy, though, it's difficult to top the compositions of Norman Blake, and Hall fittingly closes out this well-conceived package with an inspired arrangement of "Green Light on the Southern/Bony Crossing the Alps." That one's guaranteed to make your spine tingle. Good stuff there.

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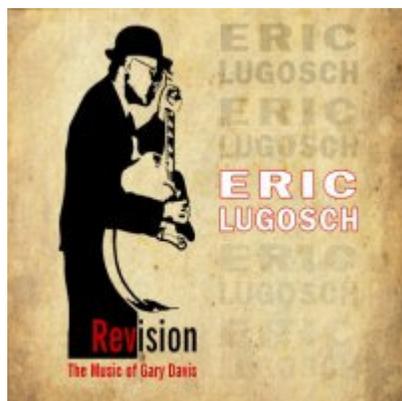
The first word that comes to mind concerning this eccentric release is "charming." The Beatles Uke is a charming collection of Beatles tunes performed on ukeleles in Hawkes' self-styled "Ukesymphonic" style. The term ukesymphonic is actually a bit of a misnomer; the sound is more that of a small chamber ensemble. Greg Hawkes is best known as the keyboardist for early 80s It band, The Cars. You might think he's crazy, but Hawkes brings faithful arrangements, delightful musicianship and ukesymphonic studio skills to this labor of love. And you might think I'm kidding, but I'm not when I say that Hawkes puts the much-maligned ukulele on the boards as an instrument worthy of serious consideration, especially as a melody instrument. The opener, "Penny Lane," sports the nimble uke effortlessly capturing the counterpoint melodies associated with the brass section. The parts almost seem to have been written for

the diminutive instrument. Big-time uke proponent George Harrison would have been thrilled with these tracks. The delicate tonalities on the signature intro lick to "And I Love Her" suit the song perfectly. And on "Here Comes the Sun,"-Ringtones! Throughout the work, adapted vocal melodies unfold in delicate beauty on this pipsqueak of the guitar family. Sly studio effects are appropriately applied to "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite" that all add up to... too much fun. "She's Leaving Home" features the baritone ukulele to register a real depth of emotion on the string section parts. "Honey Pie," of course, must have originally been written on the uke. Hawkes uses a range of ukuleles, from the mighty baritone to the tinkly soprano to an effect that can only be called ukesymphonic. So when is someone going to invent the double bass uke? One might quibble with the song selection ("Something" isn't here) and some songs adapt better than others, but I've already named a good number of winners. The outing is a novelty in the true sense of the word -- new -- in that the approach prompts you to hear these songs anew. And forty years down the road, that is no mean feat.

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Listen to "[Penny Lane](#)" (mp3)**Eric Lugosch, "Revision: The Music of Gary Davis," On Wry Records, 2008**

There are a handful of guitar players whose names are said with a reverent tone. They're the ones who laid the foundation for where today's pickers can go. Men like Robert Johnson or Blind Blake or Big Bill Broonzy. And then there's The Rev. Reverend Gary Davis has few equals in the proud history of fingerstyle guitar playing, and his style has been studied and copied by many great players, including Ernie Hawkins, Stefan Grossman, and Roy Book Binder. Eric Lugosch's new homage to Davis, "Revision," is a fine showcase of his own prodigious talents channeling the master, with his own unique touch. It's a testament to chops refined over the past 25 years since he won the National Fingerpicking championships in Winfield Kansas; the man can flat out play. The 12 cuts reflect some of the genius of Gary Davis, and in

places, may even sound cleaner, due to Lugosch's Kevin Ryan guitar. "Candy Man" is a faithful reproduction of the original, slightly sweeter, but perhaps missing some of the Rev's raw power (who can blame him? no one could match it anyway). On "Soldier's Drill", Lugosch nails Davis' march time while driving the beat with that thumb. In his liner notes, Lugosch admits to picking some more obscure pieces, in order to give a broad picture of his musical repertoire, which was vast to say the least. So included are nuggets like "Whistlin' Blues", Davis' only recorded slide guitar piece, wailing its sing-song melody; the opening "Marine Band"; and "Blues Rag in C". If you're a fan of Piedmont Blues picking, it doesn't get much better than this collection; kudos to Lugosch on a fine tribute to one of the true masters of the six-string.

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Listen to "[I Belong to the Band](#)" (mp3)

Dean Magraw, "Foxfire," CandyRat Records, 2008



From its bioluminescent title, you might expect Dean Magraw's "Foxfire" to illuminate, and you'd be right. Magraw's emotive acoustic guitar and sitar seemingly create any mood. "Gad Zukes" is full of energy and life. It's catchy, playful, uplifting melody is one you'll hear long after the disc is out of the player. The repetitive hooks in this song are the perfect soundtrack to an upbeat stroll on a sunny day. "Myst of the Mourning" employs beautiful use of natural harmonics and delicate picking to create a haunting, contemplative song. "Angel One" sounds like a classical piece. Nylon strings and a slower pace take the listener to a reflective, almost melancholy place. While there seems to be hope in this mellow piece, the sadness seems to permeate and color the overall feel. Sitar is a difficult instrument to meld with western music. In "After the Rain", Dean Magraw makes artful use of the volume-swell

effect of chords on this Indian instrument. The nasal, buzzy drone of Magraw's mesmerizing sitar sounds like his playing on the rest of "Foxfire," but it adds an exotic locale to the map. The flurry of quickly ascending notes at the end of the track sound like a Fender Rhodes electric piano; an extremely cool ending to tight, mysterious song. "TranceMission" adds to jazzier chords and smoking blues licks. If there were any doubts about Dean's chops, "TranceMission" clears them up in short order. The call and response style of the song is yet another showcase for the tasty, grove-based originals on "Foxfire". Though there are many bright spots, the highlight of the album is the closing track, "Amazing Grace," the unofficial "Johnny B. Goode"-type benchmark of acoustic guitar. Smooth, violin-like Ebowed swells release the timeless melody; a technique often overlooked on acoustic instruments. Clearly, Magraw is not afraid to push the envelope, take us off the beaten path, and show us something new. The result is big songs. Although it does sound like he's sitting in the room with you, strumming and picking away, the thick arrangements and expert recording make "Foxfire" surround you in Magraw's vision. Unlike many solo guitar works, this album does not leave you wanting the rest of the band to join in. Dean Magraw's solid guitar work supports a strong voice and vision. "Foxfire" is a beautiful testament to the artistry of Dean Magraw, a man not afraid to color outside the lines.

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Listen to "[After the Rain](#)" (mp3)



Anne Weiss, "Concrete World and the Lover's Dream," Potter Street Records, 2008



I know Anne as a songwriter with sharp instincts and songs that'll blow

your hair back. I had no idea she was such a gifted blues singer too. That little rasp in her voice is perfect for classics like Robert Johnson's "Come on in My Kitchen" as well as her own songs like the title cut. Her band doesn't sound like a bunch of side players thrown together, but like a group who hangs out in their spare time, sharing tunes and swapping stories. There's a great mix of covers and Anne's originals. She does nothing half way, from the bitterness in "Liar's Day" -- about the futility of war, particularly this one we're in -- to the lustful tone of "Special Delivery," delivered with beat box, a slappin' acoustic guitar, funky horns and a gospel choir. Amen and pass the chocolate. It takes ovaries to tackle Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" but she does it well, giving us enough of that great melody but making it her own with an earthy percussive arrangement. "Fall" is a wonderful anthem about keeping what's good in this world and willing the rest to fall. She's a talented lyricist, painting with vivid colors and texture. In "The Song About the Affair I'm Not Having" she sings, "This house of winter / Has no right to call your name / Thirty below wind chills the bone / And I'm bursting into flame." "Sunday River" is a spiritual piece with a gospel flavor. There's more classic blues in Mississippi Fred McDowell's "Write Me a Few of Your Lines." Wrapping up the release is one of my favorite Jackson Browne tunes, "These Days." She slows it down, making the words mean even more. Her expressive voice is accompanied by some damn fine acoustic guitar from David Jacob-Strains.

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Luke Winslow-King, "Old/New Baby," Fox on a Hill Records, 2009



Led by a jazzy tuba and intuitive percussion, Luke Winslow-King shuffles and sways his way into the heart -- and the soul -- of New Orleans on his second collection, "Old/New Baby." The singer/songsmith's fine National Reso-Phonic guitar occasionally gets lost in the swirling mix of ragtime brass and lively woodwinds, but no matter. His silken voice, which dips now and then into a Satchmo-inspired rumble, holds this gumbo together like a Cajun roux. It's surprising to find Winslow-King's from Michigan and classically trained after hearing this Mardi Gras expedition. Still, he shows himself a stellar student, absorbing the rusticity and spontaneity of a street band, without forsaking his gift for melody and composition. His 15 mostly short tunes (the longest clocks in at just over three minutes) fly fast and furious, cutting a wide swatch of variation throughout. "As April is to May" is as tasty as a beignet by the

levee, while the moody "Bird Dog Blues" sounds as if it could have been produced by atmospheric genius Daniel Lanois, with its spurting guitar and fuzz bass. Winslow-King took a bit of a journey following his string-laden debut CD, but with this "Old/New Baby," it looks as if he's found his way.

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Paulo Bellinati, GSP Recordings, 2008



The popular music of Brazil has found mass international appeal due to its characteristic blend of distinct South American rhythms, swooning vocals, and soothing jazz harmonies. Popular composers such as João Gilberto and Antonio Carlos Jobim have not only defined this genre with their vast wealth of compositions, they have also had an unmistakable influence on many contemporary classical compositions,

which are more familiar to the worldwide classical guitar community. In his recent release "A Felicidade," Paulo Bellinati has brought these complimentary styles together by arranging a collection of popular Brazilian songs for solo classical guitar. A highly-respected composer himself, Bellinati has also included two of his own works which he feels compliment the other selections. In his arrangements Bellinati does an excellent job of maintaining the original effect of each piece, while embellishing the gentle melodic content through the warm tones of his nylon string guitar. For example, in one work by João Gilberto, Bellinati cleverly mimics the 'scat' vocal techniques used by Gilberto in the original. True to the style of the music, Bellinati takes great expressive liberties with pulse and rhythm, creating to a soothing, restful, and almost nostalgic atmosphere throughout the recording. Casual listeners will find this disc appealing for its delicate style and immediate accessibility, while guitar aficionados will appreciate the technical challenge of the works, and Bellinati's world-class technique.

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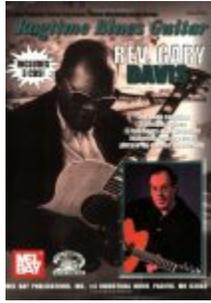
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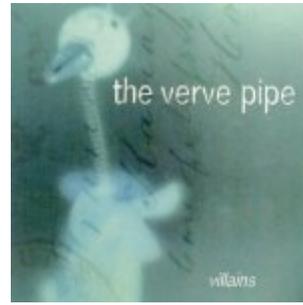
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