

Since recording the album, they have added a fourth member, drummer George Duron, but the drums on the album are played by Jimmy Smith (apart from three tracks where Dave Pennington sits behind the kit).

Smith, Bernard and Creaney share the songwriting and the lead vocals and Creaney's vocal and songwriting skills compare well to his more experienced band members. *Dying Trying* is an attractive song with interesting wordplay and a title that forms a catchy chorus, *What's Coming* has a poetic turn of phrase and *Nobody Up Drinking (But Us)* has inventive imagery. Creaney delivers his song with a voice that has a combination of smooth upper range and throaty croak that reminds me of Bobby Bare Jr.

Smith's songs, such as *Ain't Gonna Have It, Fidel's Parking Lot* and *The Original Bloodstained Five* have a quirky character in both their melody and lyrics. Particularly enjoyable is the funky soul of *Mount Bullshit* (with trumpet from guest musician Kullen Fuchs) where the band somehow weaves in a reference to Edvard Grieg's *Hall Of The Mountain King*. Claude Bernard contributes a couple of songs: *Cockroaches Of Staymore* has a distinctive rock rhythm and well-organised lyrics, but less successful is the turgid nature of *Where's The Pub*.

Budget Cuts is slightly rough around the edges, which suits the southern rock/Americana vibe and adds to the charm, but the discipline fails towards the end of the album and the last two tracks are just too messy. Overall it is a solid debut with good songwriting, enjoyable performances and bags of potential with Mark Creaney injecting fresh ideas and excellent playing. It will please Gourds fans and The Hard Pans might begin to build their own following.

Michael Hingston

**MISNER & SMITH
Seven Hour Storm**

★★★★



Seven Hour Storm / Calling / Miles Away (instrumental) / Lost And Found / The Upside / Lovers Like Us / Bird Street / 15 Months / Tamalpais / Next Time Around / Miles Away (vocal)

Producer: Jeff Kazor

Self Release

46:35

Although Misner and Smith have toured the UK and played small venues and house parties, I had not heard of the Californian duo before and this album has been around for a while but is now being promoted in the UK, presumably because of their visits. They met at a Shakespeare festival in 2002 and then appeared in a tribute show to Woody Guthrie. They realised that they had something special together and they now work as a duo, both singing and with Sam playing acoustic guitar and Megan double-bass, though there are a few additional instruments on this album.

Their strength is in Sam Misner's songwriting and they perform like an early Simon and Garfunkel. They also remind me of Gillian Welch and David Rawlings although they sound warmer than that duo. They never lose track of the melody and the opening cut, *Seven Hour Storm*, is especially strong.

This is their fourth album and it has been funded by Kickstarter. I've yet to invest in a Kickstarter project and I would be dubious

about an album of new material as I wouldn't know what I would get for my money. On the other hand, if I had put my money into this project, I would have received 10 good songs in an attractive package with full lyrics but admittedly with no photo of the band.

I love the harmonies of *Lovers Like Us* and the fun of *The Upside* and *Bird Street*, which sounds like demos from the Byrds with different time signatures like *Eight Miles High*. The delightful *Next Time Around* reflects their love for Woody Guthrie. If you look at YouTube, you will find that they have a tougher side as there is a version of *The Weight* performed at a house concert.

Spencer Leigh

**THE WHISKEY CHARMERS
The Whiskey Charmers**

★★★★



Elevator / Vampire / Straight & Narrow / Neon Motel Room / C Blues / Parlor Lights / Can't Leave / Sidewinder / Waltz

Producer: The Whiskey Charmers

Self Release

37:27

The Whiskey Charmers are from Detroit but you'd think it would be more likely be Arizona. Formed in 2013, they say their music is hard to classify and they're not kidding. Not what you'd traditionally call country, and certainly not traditional country, rather it is a blend of Chris Isaak and early Calexico that is strong on laid-back

South-western rhythms, with an eerie and sexy quality that quickly got under my skin. This would make a wonderful soundtrack for a David Lynch movie, or even *From Dusk Till Dawn*. I could imagine any of the tracks offering an interesting juxtaposition to some intense on-screen violence. If you'd just driven through the desert for eight hours and pulled into a roadside bar in the middle of nowhere you'd want this band to playing to a bunch of barflies, bikers and weirdos.

The band are a trio consisting of Carrie Shepard on vocals and acoustic guitar, Lawrence Daversa on lead guitar, lap steel, and harmony vocals, and Brian Feriby on drums and this is their debut release. Funded on Kickstarter - they even offered an option that as well as a house concert included dinner cooked by the band for the more generous investors - the band have certainly invested wisely. The quality of the recording is spot-on, and Carrie Shepard's sometimes dream-like vocals not only perfect, but perfectly in the mix. I found myself wondering what *C Blues* might sound like with a Patsy Cline-type arrangement, but undoubtedly the most straightforward country track is the closing, and simply titled, *Waltz*. It reminded me of something Emmylou might have recorded.

Much of the material has a 'noir' feel to it, most notably and not surprisingly *Vampire*, but my favourite track is *Can't Leave* - Shepard seems to like a song title that is to the point! - however, some listeners might like a bit more variety. I almost felt as though you could take the rhythm track from almost any song and overlay it on any of the others. This wasn't really a problem for me, as even the five minute numbers enticed me with their groove, but just saying.

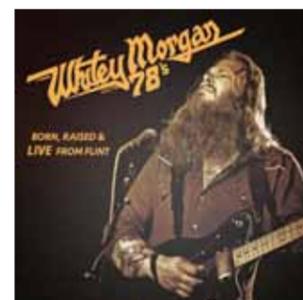
This self-titled release is perfect for late night listening and I'll certainly be following the

development of this band with interest. One fan describes them on their website as "Sex. With death shortly thereafter." Wish I'd thought of that. They have certainly charmed me.

Duncan Warwick

**WHITEY MORGAN AND THE 78'S
Born, Raised And Live From Flint**

★ 1/2



Buick City / Cocaine Train / Crazy / Cheatin' Again / Bad News / Prove It All To You / Turn Up The Bottle / Another Round / I'm On Fire / I Ain't Drunk / Honky Tonk Queen / Where Do You Want It / Mind Your Own Business

Producer: not listed

Bloodshot

49:57

Cult outlaw, Ameripolitan, and old-style country act Whitey Morgan and The 78's return with a live CD, recorded in 2011, and released late in 2014. The delay could be caused by how dire the music is, with the release as a lazy after thought. The CD is packed with tired cover versions, all inferior to the originals. The worst of these is a version of Bruce Springsteen's *I'm On Fire*, which certainly isn't, and raises the question, why is an outlaw country act playing rock music? Most of this new release however, sounds more rock than country. Whitey Morgan, who is almost shouting at times, tries to copy his hero Waylon Jennings, who definitely didn't do it this-way. Then we have the dull thud of

a sound mix, which further makes the music sound more rock than country.

Whitey Morgan even manages to make Johnny Paycheck's *Cocaine Train* sound tedious. On the 1979 original we have a real vocal, sung like the singer has gone through an ordeal, whereas the new version sounds sloppy, even for a live show. For a live album *Born, Raised And Live From Flint* has little life in it: it's empty, flat, boring, predictable, risk-free and very dated, in a bad way. Listening to this CD drains the pleasure from music, sadly there is nothing here to excite or engage the mind.

Paul Riley

**CHRISTINA MARTIN
It'll Be Alright**

★★



It'll Be Alright / Reaching Out / I've Got A Gun / Lines / Puppet Museum / You Ran From Me / Take Me Back In A Dream / You Don't Have To Leave Tonight / Things You Can't Tell By Looking Her Way / Somewhere With You

Producer: Dale Murray

Come Undone

39:07

There's a tendency to lump any guitar-strumming singer-songwriter into the box marked 'folk' or, in the case of Christina Martin, alternative country. The reason is that artists like her, Jewel and Sheryl Crow, who would once have been identified as pop no longer fit into

contemporary definitions of that term or, at least, the play-lists of pop and rock radio stations where to be a female artist today is less about song-writing than, to quote Meghan Trainor's *All About That Bass*, having "all the right junk in all the right places."

But while Jewel and Crow have made excursions into country, Jewel has never wholly fitted in and Crow had to change her style considerably. Martin, by contrast, has never sounded country to me, and certainly doesn't on her latest where she's made a concerted effort to step away from the traditional singer-songwriter sound to a bright pop style characterised by tight, jangly electric guitar and synthesisers.

There are sounds here, from the rock guitar solo on *I've Got A Gun* to the soft drum loop of *Take Me Back*, that might be heard on an album by Lady Antebellum or Little Big Town. But as much as Nashville borrows from pop and rock, there are usually at least some elements that keep a record country, be it a vocalist with a southern accent, lyric references to pickup trucks, small towns and beer, or a clarity to the writing, particularly with regard to story-telling and picture-painting, that remains unique to the writers of Music City.

This album has none of those country anchors. Martin was born in Florida, but having grown up in Canada and spent time in Europe she has not a hint of the south in her accent or vocal style.

There are no references to life below the Mason-Dixon line, but cosmopolitan mentions of Paris, New York and Venice, and drinking French tea at De Oude Remise (which is a restaurant in the Netherlands).

Most of all, there's nothing country about the song structures. Whereas country tends to tell a story, which creates an emotional response

in the listener, pop generally plunges straight in with a description of a feeling, with little narrative context.

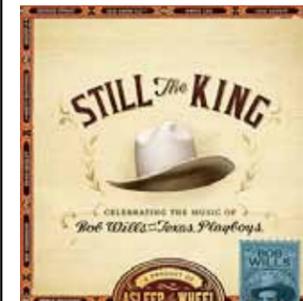
On a country album you'd know what all the songs were about. On this record I didn't know what any of them were about.

I'm not saying that makes it a bad album. But if Martin and others like her are looking for a label to define them now that pop no longer fits, I'm afraid country isn't it.

Douglas McPherson

**ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL
Still The King:
Celebrating the Music of
Bob Willis and His Texas Playboys**

★★★★★



Intro-Texas Playboy Theme (with Leon Rausch) / I Hear Ya Talkin' (with Amos Lee) / The Girl I Left Behind (with The Avett Brothers) / Trouble In Mind (with Lyle Lovett) / Keeper Of My Heart (with Merle Haggard and Emily Gimble) / I Can't Give You Anything But Love (with Kat Edmonson) / Tiger Rag (with Old Crow Medicine Show) / What's The Matter With The Mill (with Pokey LaFarge) / Navajo Trail (with Willie Nelson and The Quebe Sisters) / Silver Dew On The Bluegrass Tonight (with The Del McCoury Band) / Faded Love (with The Time Jumpers) / South Of The Border (Down Mexico Way) (with George Strait) / I Had Someone Else Before I Had You (with Elizabeth Cook) / My Window Faces The South (with