

The Heavy Guilt

Lift Us Up From This

by Frank Kocher

For years Al Howard and Josh Rice were involved in the K23 Orchestra, which played drum and keyboard-propelled funk with Howard's spoken-word, hip-hop inspired vocals up front and Rice playing keys. Their new band is The Heavy Guilt, with a totally different musical approach. The new disc *Lift Us Up From This* takes listeners places that fans of the old Orchestra would never have imagined.

The new sound is mellow, ballad-heavy alternative pop, with Howard still writing the introspective lyrics and Rice writing the music. The new focus is on singer/acoustic guitarist Eric Canzona, who handles the duties well. Sean Martin, Jason Littlefield, and J Smart play guitar, bass, and drums on the 12 tracks. Canzona sounds an awful lot like Wilco frontman Jeff Tweedy on many tracks here.

"Clove" tells much about what is to come: soft, slow, serious, and moody. This is a metaphor-filled poem set to music, as Canzona sings of the female subject, "She's red sun rising in a year of drought/When the parched people pray/Pray for a cloud." Howard is a hell of a lyricist, and this is one of those discs that needs the lyrics included with it (nope, but they're a few clicks away on the web). The recording of "Running With the Wind," for some reason, buries the chorus vocals beneath a lead guitar track, either a poor mix or a decision that didn't work. The highlight of the disc is "Heavier Than Mist," which delivers its heavy lyrical burden at a pace that doesn't bog down, has a memorable melody riff, and good dynamics. The closest thing to a rocker here is "Let This Daylight," which features cranked up guitars playing a sliding chord pattern that catches the ear, not weighed down by lyrics that seem to be about a post-apocalyptic world.

The tone turns (a bit) more upbeat for "On My Deck," which features Howard writing about his self-questioning moments, "Just how did I get here/I can see for miles, but I'm not in the clear." This tune rolls out smoothly as a killer-catchy chorus kicks in, and repeats over and over on a carpet of acoustic guitars, another highlight. On "Mixed Messages," the lead vocal does a call and response with the lyrics, switching channels with each line; this really gets the best effect only on earphones.

The pacing of the disc is uneven. The latter half of the CD tends to lose steam as a stretch of four ballads follow one another. The best of these is "Home," which uses keys and violin touches to flesh out a homecoming story. "Open My Eyes to Blindness" has a beat, and a message about "loving the silence even when it's loud."

The Heavy Guilt makes music that showcases the ballad writing of Josh Rice and the lyrical imagery of Al Howard. "Lift Us Up From This" is somber stuff for the most part, but has some catchy surprises and shows a fascinating shift in musical direction.



Christopher Dale

Songs I Know the Words To

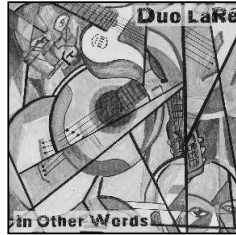
by Mike Alvarez

Christopher Dale is a locally based artist whose forte is creating music that immediately catches the ear and lingers in the mind. This talent has garnered him success as a jingle writer for a number of companies, and it has also served him well in his more purely artistic endeavors. Dale's third solo CD, *Songs I Know the Words To*, is a smorgasbord for the power pop lover. This almost purely acoustic production is packed to the brim with melodic hooks, memorable melodies, and catchy rhythms that allow him to deliver his whimsical lyrics. His voice and persona are instantly likeable and leave a lasting impression. He keeps things generally lighthearted, though there are layers of emotion and meaning in most of the songs.

It sounds as if the songs were initially written for acoustic guitar and voice, and they would work just fine if performed that simply. Nevertheless, Dale recruited some top local musicians to flesh out the arrangements and the result is a powerful and varied mix that sounds fresh from start to finish. Mandolin, world percussion, ukulele, piano, organ, and even a string arrangement make appearances at various points, giving this album a compelling sonic depth. Expertly arranged vocal harmonies are the icing on the cake, giving the music the final edge it needs to put smiles on faces.

The album opener is "Hilary," a bouncy Brit-pop styled tune that takes its cue from early Beatles and Monkees hits. From this point on, listeners are on notice that they are about to be treated to some really catchy songwriting. The rest of the album does not disappoint. The mandolin fills that run throughout "Addicted" create a distinctly REM flavor, helped along by Dale's Michael Stipe-like vocal delivery on this song. One particularly memorable number is "Don't Say Happy Birthday," a humorous reflection on the aging process. Its sardonic lyrics, set to such peppy and energetic music, tell a tale that is all too familiar to most of us. Things get introspective and melancholy with "Oh No," a plaintive ballad in waltz time whose sincere plea for forgiveness is very affecting.

A huge "Mrs. Robinson" style intro heralds the arrival of "I Don't Know," which easily slips into a Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young-influenced rave up. The massive wall of acoustic guitars and the vocal harmonies make such a comparison inevitable, and it's a very effective homage. As has often been said, they just don't make music like this anymore! After a couple more excellent tunes, the upbeat "New Jersey" and the somber "When You Go," Dale wraps things up with a stripped-down ukulele-driven cover of the Ramones' classic "I Wanna Be Sedated." It's a cute punctuation mark for a collection of excellent songs impeccably performed and superbly recorded.



Duo LaRé

In Other Words

by Frank Kocher

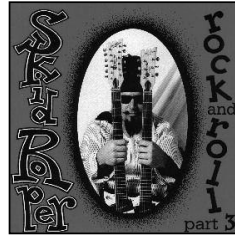
The endless musical possibilities of mandolin and guitar in the hands of two virtuoso performers are explored on *In Other Words*, the new CD from Duo LaRé. San Diegans Chris Acquavella and Nathan Jarrell complement one another on the mostly acoustic affair, as Acquavella contributed five songs to the generous 13-tune menu of jazz, world music, and other sounds ranging from gypsy dances to classically influenced ragas. Jarrell's guitar takes the spotlight occasionally, and the two are joined on some tracks by cello, bass, and percussion to fill out the sound and potential of the songs. The locally recorded disc (Studio West) sounds pristine. Erdis Maxhelaku is featured on cello, Harley Magino plays double bass, and Steve Haney is the percussionist; the arrangements are crisp.

This is a disc for mandolin fans. Acquavella has an interesting background as both a rock musician and classical performer, and his skill on the little lute makes this project work. Listening to his original "Mtarija," any past conceptions of the mando as primarily an instrument in Italian music or bluegrass are quickly gone as he shows in the space of five minutes the potential for the instrument to take over and dominate as a jazz voice. The title tune features understated interplay between Jarrell's soft guitar statements and Acquavella's more pointed responses. "Freedom to Travel" is another song featuring just the two, which morphs from style to style over the verses like a musical travelogue through exotic locales. Jarrell is solo on electric guitar to play a mellow Pat Metheny tune, "Always and Forever." Brisk Latin jazz is no problem for the mandolin on "Um Abraco Seu Domingos," as Acquavella follows the strong bass/percussion bottom; then on "Rondo" the notes ring out like words sung by an ethereal singer. On both tunes, the jazzy guitar support by Jarrell is perfect.

The disc scores points for musical diversity. Nearly too long at 58 minutes, the challenge here is to keep the listener engaged despite a sound that is by nature somewhat limited by the range of the instruments. The Duo's answer is to take the listener from track to track through an ever-shifting range of tempos and styles.

"I'mardin" is Acquavella's tour de force and starts like a clock, ticking away before giving way to complex arpeggios and scales that build, climb, and dissolve only to tick away again. The solo mandolin tune showcases Acquavella's classical side, and sounds like several musicians playing together well. Jarrell's "Molly" is a soft jazz tune, highlighted by his tasteful solo, which is echoed a moment later by the mandolin. "Palske" is an unusual song that has a very catchy hook, and a strident, flamenco pulse. Nice cello touches add to the mysterious flavor.

Acoustic jazz aficionados will find this disc a must-have. Duo LaRé have made a bold commitment to blend and unusual sounding mandolin-centered music, and *In Other Words* is full of technical mastery and musical inventiveness.



Skid Roper

Rock and Roll, Part 3

by Frank Kocher

Skid Roper's place in the local rock music scene seems secure. As a member of numerous local bands for over three decades, he has combined his guitar, mandolin, washboard, bass, and vocals with other artists, including Tomcat Courtney, Mojo Nixon, Chris Davies, and many others. More than a colorful sideman, he has also performed solo and with his own bands since 1990, and has been writing songs for decades.

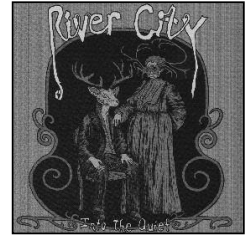
His new CD, *Rock and Roll Part 3*, is his first new disc since '91 and the result of over a decade of time and effort. Backed by Chip McClendon on bass and Joel Kmak's drums, Roper's sound is a unique early-'60s mix of reverb, staccato guitar licks, feedback, and wacky deadpan singing that form a winning synergy over the 12 Roper originals and one cover. At times it's like hearing the early Yardbirds with Dick Dale on guitar, playing songs that range from beat poetry to old TV spy themes-and it all works amazingly well.

"Remember the Look" sets a high standard as the opener; Roper's echoed vocals mixed under slashing guitar lines as the power-rock riffs build to a superb double-tracked guitar solo, while Kmak's drums drive the beat. A slower, almost Farfisa-toned keyboard dominates "Downtown Down," which has haunting lyrics and a vocal that both contribute to a Doors vibe. "Hope" is a 64-verse poem over Nixon's bongo percussion that is never dull, and "Skid Drive" follows with an instrumental that gives Roper another chance to riff away with his angular scales and fast pick. The only cover is "Party Lights," and many of the disc's guests are on board (vocalists Joyce Rooks and José Sinatra, sax/flute player Johnny Vau, trombonist Steelbone Cook) for this one. It's fun and sounds like it was a party to record, but this campy tune is an odd choice for the only cover on a disc like this.

Roper's sound is nearly impossible to categorize, though some of the best material here echo the vibe of "Secret Agent Man" and other black-white-days TV hits. His guitar playing, prominent on this disc, seems like a cool update on the style of early guitar hero Hank Marvin of the early '60s British band the Shadows.

The standout track, "Drunk American Style," returns to the vibe of "Remember the Look" for high impact guitar-rock, with a great hook and harmonics. The chorus even has a basso vocal touch that may be a nod to the late Beat Farmer Country Dick Montana. A sonic surprise is "Jennifer Johnson," a good light-pop style tune that sounds almost like a British Invasion single with "sha-la-la-la" choruses, background harmonies, and straight-up arrangement. Roper is back to rocking with "Prism Walls," another tune that scores, this time with electric mandolin.

Rock and Roll Part 3 may have taken years to get recorded, but it takes no time at all to get in the listener's head. Mixing genres and turning back the musical clock, Skid Roper has captured a sound of his own and it is unique.



River City

Into the Quiet

by Mike Alvarez

River City is a San Diego-based quintet that has been together since 2008. Although they categorize themselves as folk artists, their six-song EP *Into the Quiet* shows that they take their influences from outside the genre as well. The first track, "Bring Me Home," is a spirited acoustic rock song that features a relentless beat and is punctuated with surf guitar licks. Jon Kruger fronts the band, singing lead as well as playing guitar and harmonica. His voice has a homespun, rustic quality that is perfectly suited to the band's musical style. The band immediately takes a hard left turn in the second track; "The Devils Will Awake" is more of a hoe down, complete with washboard rhythms and fiddle and mandolin solos. Yet underneath it still lurks an electric guitar punching up the arrangements. Despite its dark subject matter, one can easily envision a lively country dance taking place during this song.

"Blood and Bones" is immediately reminiscent of Civil War Americana. Its somber lyrics and minor key melody create a haunting mood that brings to mind songs like "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." The combination of guitar, banjo, and mandolin with accordion accompaniment also does a lot toward reinforcing this impression. This song, above all the others on this EP, goes a long way toward creating the illusion that it was written in another century. "Into the Quiet," the title track, starts simply with just acoustic guitar and voice, gradually building with harmony vocals and banjo coming in to punctuate appropriate moments. As the lyrics end, the song comes into full bloom as bass, drums, piano, fiddle, and guitar accompany a wordless vocal melody, creating an emotionally satisfying coda.

"Aging Dogs in a Fiery Kennel" gets a deceptively slow start but shifts gears to become a blazing acoustic rave up. They set a country/bluegrass-style arrangement to a shuffling rock rhythm, allowing the instrumentalists to tear it up with a number of solos between verses. It's an impressive display of intensity that proves to be the emotional climax of this collection of songs. The EP closes with a pretty ballad called "Aging Lines Around Your Eyes." It's a mid-tempo waltz that allows the band to bid a fond farewell to listeners. Like the rest of the songs, the lyrics are a bit on the bleak side, but that seems to be the tenor of River City's art. There is a certain emotional tone they are trying to set and they are very successful at it. Even the EP's artwork works toward this. The cover and the booklet are illustrated with a darkly whimsical set of drawings that reflect an aesthetic sense from another era. Everything fits: the musical style, the lyrics, and the graphics complement each other perfectly. It's wonderful to find a band with such a well-defined artistic vision.

