

Alt-country artists showcase variety

BY HARRY BURSON
Reviewer

Howdy there, music lovers! We're switching things up at the College Music Roundup this week. Instead of the usual hodgepodge of current releases, we're sticking to one genre: alternative country.

Sure, alternative country was never a particularly useful genre designation. It is now perhaps even less helpful after the mid-'90s alt-country boom fizzled and the stalwart No Depression magazine folded.

Still, with the Green movement's fetish for the working class, American roots music has had a bit of a resurgence in certain circles, and alt-country refugees continue to find limited mainstream success. Let's get these records rounded up! Get along little doggies!

First off we have Lucinda Williams' latest, "Little Honey" [Lost Highway 2008]. Quick on the heels of the critically successful "West," Williams gives us her fourth album of the decade so far, compared to the only two albums she meticulously crafted in the '90s — one of which was her critical and commercial breakthrough "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road."

Where "West" was a unified, somber record dealing with the loss of Williams' mother and, of course, unnamed lovers, "Little Honey" is a looser, lighter work — an album made by someone ready to unwind a little after a period of grief.

The album opens and closes with Williams singing about the pleasures and pitfalls of rock 'n' roll. In the opener and lead single "Real Love" she claims she has finally found the fulfillment she was looking for: singing and playing in front of a crowd. The album closes with a competent if not completely successful cover of the AC/DC song "It's a Long Way to the Top (If You Wanna Rock 'n' Roll)," essentially the opposite side of the same coin, in which the singer notes the necessary tedium and pitfalls of the rock lifestyle.

In between is a grab bag of original songs. Extended, somber mid-tempo dominates the record. Ballads like "Wishers Were Horses" and "The Knowing" are classic Williams at her best. The nine-minute "Rarity" manages to not overstay its welcome and is an emotional high point of the album.

As nice as these ballads are, they are somewhat at odds with the suggestive rock of "Honey Bee" or the album's one major misstep, Williams' overly campy country duet with Elvis Costello (that guy is everywhere these days) on "Jailhouse Tears."

With 13 songs at 64 minutes, this album runs slightly too long — half the tracks exceed five minutes. Still, the strong moments, mostly the ballads, make this a respectable addition to Williams' impressive oeuvre.

Next in the roundup we have another Williams with a slightly more royal lineage. Hank Williams III was blessed with his grandfather's name, an eerily similar voice and, as his latest album "Damn Right, Rebel Proud" [Sidewalk 2008] seeks to prove, a penchant for being ornery.

Hank Williams' grandson's fourth album begins by attacking Nashville's most venerable institution in "The Grand Ole Opry (Ain't So Grand)." Not surprisingly, Williams III is dissatisfied with current Nashville product, and even more upset that his grandfather has never been reinstated as a member after being removed for alcoholism a few months before his untimely death.

The album begins with a series of songs that stay within a traditional honky-tonk framework. It's not until the drugged-out "H8 Line" that Williams' III psychedelic strands pick up again following his trippy 2006 album "Straight to Hell."

Lyrical, this album is nothing new. Williams III continues to sing about what a tough, drunk partier he is in rave-ups like "Wild and Free" and morning after laments like "I Wish I Knew."

"Damn Right, Rebel Proud" sounds more like a Hank Williams record than anything Junior has ever done, thanks to Williams III hand-picking some excellent Nashville session cats and recording the album quick in a matter of weeks.

In "Long Hauls and Close Calls" and "P.F.F." (which stands for punching, fighting, and guess what else) Williams III splits the difference between bluegrass and hardcore with out-of-control tempos featuring fast picking and shout-along choruses. Not your typical Nashville record.

"Damn Right, Rebel Proud" suffers slightly from bad-boy lyrical monotony, but generally succeeds in mixing disparate musical traditions into a cohesive Williams III sound.

Finally this week we have alternative country's latest great troubadour, Ryan Adams and his new album "Cardinology" [Lost Highway 2008].

After Ryan Adams disbanded his mediocre alt-country outfit Whiskeytown in 1999, he somehow managed to catapult himself into the mainstream with his second solo album "Gold" in 2001. Maybe it was the Elton John endorsement, or perhaps it was the fact that MTV put his video for "New York, New York" in heavy rotation after Sept. 11, either way Adams had it made.

And then he choked. His next album was an unimpressive collection of demos, followed by what essentially amounted to a Strokes tribute album, followed by a Smiths tribute album featuring a terrible Oasis cover. Adams' output was spotty at best, until he assembled his faceless backing group, which supported him for the three albums of genre exercises he

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Photos courtesy of Lost Highway Records
Alternative country musicians Ryan Adams and the Cardinals (top) and Lucinda Williams (bottom) deliver consistent but mediocre albums.

released in 2005.

They also backed him up on last year's surprisingly consistent "Easy Tiger," an album that apparently benefited greatly from Adams' newfound sobriety.

On "Cardinology," Adams finds himself in similar sonic territory, playing classic-sounding country-rock that, while sometimes not particularly memorable, is always pleasantly listenable. There is nothing on this set that equals last year's "Two" as an obvious single, but "Fix It" and

"Born Into A Light" come close.

Occasionally the lyrics are clumsy and obscure, and the songs tend to fade into one another, but if nothing else this album shows that the newly sober Adams is capable of making two consistent albums in a row. Not as good as "Easy Tiger" but by no means bad.

That's all for this week. Next time we'll catch up with American scuzz-rockers Eagles of Death Metal, British popsters the Kaisers and more. See you then!

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