

## The Americas



### Frank Solivan & Dirty Kitchen On the Edge

Compass Records (41 mins)

★★★★★

*Long may they continue to not do the washing up*



This isn't Frank Solivan's first rodeo by any stretch, but *On the Edge*, his debut recording for Compass, could be the album that lifts the mandolin, fiddle and guitar player from the ranks of the insider's perennial pick into the upper echelon of the bluegrass/newgrass pantheon. All of the proper pieces are in place on this 10-track album. The Dirty Kitchen band – five-string banjo wizard Mike Munford, double bassist Danny Booth and 22-year-old guitarist Chris Luquette – is the tightest ensemble with whom Solivan has ever worked. The guest list includes dobro player Rob Ickes, and guest vocalists Megan McCormick and Tim O'Brien. McCormick, who happens to be Solivan's cousin, provides the perfect shade of harmonic counterpoint on two soulfully resonant songs, 'Gone' and 'Day to Day'. O'Brien supports the high tenor rendering of 'On the Edge of Letting Go', an original composition by Solivan and journalist Jon Weisberger (purportedly inspired by a Solivan family member), which illuminates the intersection of mental illness and interpersonal relationships with vividly poetic imagery. The song list also includes a thoroughly engaging mix of hoedown instrumentals ('M80', 'Bedrock'), new-fangled balladeering ('Gone'), jazz-tinged jamming ('Too Far Gone') and an extraordinary cover of 'The Letter', written by Wayne Carson Thompson and immortalised by The Box Tops with lead vocalist Alex Chilton in 1967. Re-imagined by Dirty Kitchen, 'The Letter' swings like a bluegrass classic without obscuring the hooks that made the original recording a Top 40 smash hit. *On the Edge* displays the finely honed craftsmanship and creative bravura that only transpires when the participants are just as enthusiastic about playing together as they are about the project they're playing on.

TRACK TO TRY: *Gone*

Doug DeLoach

### Jah Thomas Stop Yu Loafin

VP Records (30 mins)

★★★★★

*Deejay set from seminal slacker*



Part of the original series that helped launch London's Greensleeves record label, the 1978 album *Stop Yu*

*Loafin* has only been available to vinyl collectors until now. It is a snapshot of reggae deejay Jah Thomas in his prime. Groundbreaking by its very nature, being a full set, the album helped dispel the opinion that deejaying was merely a dressed-up way of pillaging material; Jah Thomas adds his wry commentary to all 10 tracks here, giving each a totally new authorship. All tracks were recorded at the Channel One Studio, which means a

flawless backing from house band The Revolutionaries, with Jah Thomas pushing the original vocals towards the intros and exits. These vocals include the ghostly falsetto of Horace Andy, a tool which lends itself perfectly to heavy reverb on 'Uncle Lester' and two offerings from lovers' rock hit maker John Holt. 'Love and Happiness' samples Leroy Smart's version of Bob Marley's 'Waiting in Vain'; in the hands of Jah Thomas, the sparse beauty of Marley's original is resurrected in dub. To cap this eagerly awaited reissue, *Stop Yu Loafin*'s sleeve retains the original 'day in the life of Jah Thomas' comic-book art – the man's time seems to be spent chasing girls, 'loafin' outside cafés and narrowly escaping drugs busts. It's a very similar theme and format to the 24 hours depicted on the sleeve of rapper Snoop Dogg's *Doggystyle* album of 1993. Could a taste for Greensleeves reggae classics, I wonder, have prompted Snoop's recent conversion to Rastafarianism?

TRACK TO TRY: *Love and Happiness*

Clyde MacFarlane

### April Verch Bright Like Gold

Slab Town Records (60 mins)

★★★★★

*Old-time alchemy*



This is the right kind of happy hour: spending 60 minutes sampling delicious old-time classic country, and

traditionally prepared original material, prettily presented with skill and good taste. The album's excellent balance of vocals with instrumentals extended into dance sets lets you appreciate the Ontario-bred Verch as a lively bluegrass fiddler (with some Celtic ornamentations) and as a singer with the ingenuous seduction of country diva Dolly Parton, not to mention as a percussively infectious step dancer. She's handsomely partnered here by clawhammer banjoist Cody Walters and by guitarist Hayes Griffin, both of whom also provide harmony vocals. Griffin also contributes a good-humoured original instance of Western Swing with his 'Foolish Heart'. More good taste and variety are brought in by Verch's special guests, including Bruce Molsky and Matthew Smith, who plays sassy pedal steel on a cover of Loretta Lynn's country classic, 'Don't Come Home a Drinkin', and contributes dobro elsewhere. A male vocal quality dramatically different from Walters' and Griffin's is added in close harmony by 88-year-old bluegrass legend Mac Wiseman on Verch's original 'The Only One' – which sounds as if it could have been written in Wiseman's youth – and on 'My Home in the Sky', a bit of white gospel evoking the Statler Brothers.

The arrangements, like Verch's girlish soprano, never get showy or overwhelming, and instead allow both the material and the virtuosity to shine.

TRACK TO TRY: *The Only One*

Jeff Kaliss

### Yellowman Young, Gifted and Yellow

VP Records (2 CDs, 140 mins; DVD 27 mins)

★★★★★

*'They call me Mr Sexy...'*



This new anthology of albino dancehall star Yellowman flaunts his laugh-out-loud sexual swagger over two CDs. His

massive hit 'Zungguzunguguzunguzeng' remains one of Jamaica's most sampled records. Simple, brave and playfully monotonous, Yellowman's 'toasting' vocals find a delicious middle ground between singing and chanting. While the DJ provides a crisp digital backing, Yellowman's vocal cords find buckets of personality in a range that hovers over the beat like a shadow boxer. One slip and the whole thing would tumble. The live DVD shows the tightness of Yellowman's act at the 1988 Sunsplash festival, two years after doctors gave him just months to live during a battle with cancer.

Despite his shameless promiscuity (what happened 'behind the bush' on 'Shorties' is unprintable), Yellowman has a definite endearing quality. On a cover of 'The Girl is Mine' he adopts Michael Jackson's 'lover not a fighter' role, duetting with the more macho approach of fellow toaster Peter Metro. Other collaborators include dancehall queen Sister Nancy, Sly & Robbie and Fathead, whose loyal accompaniment with Yellowman in the early 80s is probably where deejay and toaster gel most successfully; the complete albums from this period make the later anthology tracks seem crude. In general this compilation does, however, trigger fond memories for a dancehall enthusiast, both in Yellowman's creative reworking of classic reggae rhythms and by shedding light on a favourite hook you might not realise he'd done first.

TRACK TO TRY: *The Girl is Mine*

Clyde MacFarlane

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