

Backovic has actually been pursuing her ArHai project for fifteen years now, starting out as a ten-piece acoustic big band performing complex versions of traditional music from Serbia. There is much less of the accomplished composer on show here, though, and a more improvisational feel.

Lever, known for his early music projects, makes a profound contribution to proceedings, his excellent playing on the swirling *Dance Of The Bacchantes* being mashed into a faltering chaos of furious dance.

www.arhai.com

John Pheby

BRUCE MOLSKY

If It Ain't Here When I Get Back Tree Frog Music (7 00261 37499 4)

APRIL VERCH

Bright Like Gold Slab Town Records STR 13-01 (7 00261 376130 4)

Two Americans who major in traditional music, play fiddle remarkably well, but also have other strings to their bow. Molsky is well known in the UK through his appearances on *Transatlantic Sessions* tours and TV as an interpreter of old fiddle and banjo tunes and songs. This time he stretches himself even further by adding guitar to his repertoire including a superb version of Joseph Spence's *Bimini Girl*. More familiar are versions of *Cumberland Gap* and *Shady Grove*, banjo and vocal, and unaccompanied fiddle tunes, *Bona-part's Retreat*, *Last Of Callahan* and others. Molsky treats the music with respect without fossilising it, feels no need to change his voice to affect a southern accent and all in all plays authentic old-time American music in a way that proves the genre has never died.

brucemolsky.com

April Verch also adds variety to her fiddle playing. I have to say her playing is quite breathtaking and tunes like *Big Eared Mule*, *Dusty Miller*, *Jeff Sturgeon* and many more are as good as it gets. Verch also writes and sings, and if her own singing is a little quirky it does grow on you as do her songs. For good measure she has Mac Wiseman sing a couple of songs, whose voice has naturally aged but is still captivating, and has another song performed and written by Hayes Griffin, one of her band, that is a dead ringer for the Hot Club of Cowtown. I keep coming back to the fiddle playing though, great tone, feel and nothing short of exciting.

To keep the link between the two, Molsky joins Verch on fiddle to play *Evening Star Waltz* on her CD. A great reading of a little-known tune.

In summary, two classic interpreters of old-time American music with recordings that are not only valuable in their quest to keep the old times going, but are both highly enjoyable.

aprilverch.com

John Atkins

LUMIERE

My Dearest Dear IRL IRL075

SUSAN McKEOWN

Belong Hibernian Music 708434060859

My Dearest Dear is the second offering from Kerry-based female vocal duo Lumiere. Ellis Kennedy and Pauline Scanlon are two intelligently gifted singers with solo albums behind them. Combining forces in Lumiere they have attracted big praise and serious notice but sacrifice individuality for a low-fi vocal harmony approach combined with instrumental

musings that zooms just underneath the Celtic twilight radar. It's radio friendly and the right side of lovely but devoid of personality until increased exposure reveals an identity. Ellis Kennedy's west Kerry Gaelic singing shines on *Bo Na Leathadhairce* and Pauline Scanlon adds a wistful touch to *The Silver Tassie*. *Who Knows Where The Time Goes* is given an ambient '60s pop treatment à la Nouvelle Vague and guest Sinead O'Connor's force initially clashes with the pastel vocal atmospherics but fuses into an effective threesome. *My Dearest Dear* is Irish folk chasing the ambient gravy train – it may not move mountains but will certainly turn heads.

www.lumiere.com

Dubliner and long-time New York resident Susan McKeown exhibits a power and authority that is unshaken by marketing demands. *Belong*, her first self-written album in years, is stylistically American-flavoured musically borrowing more from the Joni Mitchell and Lucinda Williams schools of style and delivery than the traditional canon. It mixes full band tracks with stripped-down acoustic backings in a mixed bag of vignettes of life, love etc. Guest vocalists Declan O'Rourke and James Maddock help stretch her capabilities – O'Rourke's Jansch-like contribution to *On the Bridge To Williamsburg* adds a welcome Celtic touch while James Maddock's guest spot highlights the Americana nature of *Everything We Had Was Good*. Susan's dash of Gaelic vernacular on *The Cure For Me* is refreshingly effective and the resigned *Our Texas* is a gently evocative romantic song comparing relationships and travel. McKeown's impassioned richly stoic soprano gels best with a simplistic backing but when subjected to complex backing arrangements as on the Brechtian *Lullaby Of Manhattan* the results are unevenly awkward. That is the sole sonic blot on an impressive landscape. Susan McKeown in full flight can still deliver in spades and *Belong* succeeds for its humanity and flawed greatness.

www.susanmckeown.com

John O'Regan

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Classic Celtic Music Smithsonian/Folkways SP-11CD 40560

Right! Let's get the moans over first. 'Celtic Music'; what does it mean? Well, rather like Americana, the term is not properly defined and seems to mean different things according to who is using it, rendering it less than useful. What most people on this side of the Atlantic would agree is that it does not include English performers – and yet here there are five (six if we argue that Ewan MacColl is English).

One of these is Shirley Collins and she knew nothing of her inclusion here. It is probable that these recordings are all out of American copyright, but it would have been a courtesy for a company of this stature to at least inform her.

Having said that, the songs and the musicians are of the highest quality that the tradition and the early revival can offer. It is as if someone has loaded the best of the tradition onto an iPod and then put it in random play. Now if the listener is as dedicated to the tradition as this reviewer is, then they will have many of the items on other collections, but it is never a bad thing to be reminded of Joe Feeney, Margaret Barry & Michael Gorman, Willie Clancy, Lucy Stewart, Harry Cox etc.

Almost as enjoyable as hearing many old favourites again is reading the highly informative 40-page booklet and seeing the fascinating archive photos.

www.discovery-records.com

John Smith



Yasmine Hamdan

YASMINE HAMDAN

Ya Nass Crammed Discs CRAM 201

Whilst *Ya Nass* isn't going to set the world alight, it is in places a haunting, boldly cinematic and achingly pretty record. Yasmine Hamdan seamlessly blends influences from her native Lebanon and her adopted France. Thus, in places, as on the dramatic *La Mouch*, the record reminds of Serge Gainsbourg and elsewhere, as on opening track *Deny*, contemporary French pop-folksters like Rose come to mind. Elsewhere though, as on *Hal*, the record is far more traditionally Middle Eastern in sound.

Throughout *Ya Nass* has the definite sound of a record put together by a cinephile. *Nediya* sounds like an '80s romance whilst *Aleb* has Bladerunner/Vangelis overtures. Often times this approach is reminiscent (and Yasmine might well hate me for saying this) of Lana Del Rey's *Born To Die*.

It's a hit and miss sound. When it works, the cinematic vibes and loungey pop balance well with the delicate vocals and acoustic guitar though in places the songwriting isn't strong enough to stand up to it and somehow gets lost in the mix.

It has all the elements of a great piece of work, and on tracks like *Bala Tantanat*, you really hear Yasmine getting into a stride and carving a niche. Sometimes, though, the songs are forgettable and hence *Ya Nass* comes close, but doesn't quite deliver. The *Twin Peaks*-style melancholia, however, and enchanting folk pop elements, mean that Yasmine Hamdan is definitely one to watch.

www.yasminehamdan.com

Liam Thompson

GENERAL PAOLINO feat. MAMA CELINA

South Sudan Street Survivors IRL IRL074

Following his success with the Malawi Mouse Boys, here's another challenging but rewarding recording from producer Ian Brennan. "All recordings are field recordings," he has stated, and this one, recorded in an unfinished building on a construction site in Juba, certainly doesn't test the rule. Rudimentary accompaniment, voice that seems to fade in and out of focus, fluctuating energy levels, songs that hesitate, jump and usually end unpredictably – this is ultimately unglorious