

New Releases

JANE KRAMER

Carnival of Hopes

Self-Released

LOCUST HONEY STRING BAND

Never Let Me Cross Your Mind

Self-Released

APRIL VERCH

The Newpart

Slab Town Records

Country music is having something of a moment right now. Not just in the USA, but around the world, including the UK. Whether that's the success of UK country acts like The Shires and Sasha McVeigh, the huge *Country to Country* show held in London, Glasgow and Dublin, or think pieces in *The Guardian* inspired by controversial country crossover artists like Kacey Musgraves, it's difficult to avoid that country twang. However, we occasionally need reminding that Taylor Swift and the Zak Brown Band are not exactly representative and that country music is a broad church. And this is where Jane Kramer, April Verch, and the Locust Honey String Band come in.

Jane Kramer's second solo album is a hidden gem. Hailing from Asheville, North Carolina, Kramer is steeped in traditional country and Appalachian balladry. The fantastic honky tonk opener, 'Half Way Gone', is good enough to grace any album from Loretta Lynn to Laura Cantrell. In truth, the highlights of *Carnival of Hopes* are many and varied. From the regretful title track to the stand-out and seemingly highly personal 'Good Woman', the album is both celebratory and wistful by turns. There's a touch of New Orleans jazz to 'Why'd I Do that Blues' and Kramer's version of Tom Petty's 'Down South', from his *Highway Companion* album, may be even better than the original. *Carnival of Hopes* deserves the widest possible audience from anyone who appreciates well-crafted songs, delivered with a hard-won honesty.

Also hailing from Asheville are the Locust Honey String Band. Built around a nucleus of Chloe Edmonstone (fiddle and vocals) and Meredith

Watson (guitar and vocals), Locust Honey are in a direct line of strong female country performers, from Mother Maybelle and June Carter, through Loretta Lynn and Kitty Wells.

Their voices blend as effectively as their mix of original and traditional songs and tunes; Chloe's self-penned songs, such as 'When the Whiskey's Gone', 'Horse Drawn Buggy' and 'How You Must've Felt', could have been written any time since the Carter Family. Tunes like 'Boogerman' and 'McMichen's Breakdown' feature some blistering fiddle work and altogether sound like a hoedown for your stereo. Stand-out track, though, is their version of the traditional 'Henry Lee', as filtered through Nick Cave from his *Murder Ballads* album. It manages to keep all of Cave's menace, whilst losing none of the history. Absolutely superb.

So what of April Verch's old timey charms? Unbelievably, *The Newpart* is her tenth album and yet it's as fresh as when she was first up on stage at the country fiddlers' monthly dance event in her native Ottawa County. Verch has a pleasingly sweet voice that gives good service to songs like 'If You Hadn't Gone Away', 'Bring Your Clothes Back Home' and 'It Don't Do Nothing But Rain'. There's a certain vaudevillian charm to these and other songs that will appeal to fans of the Be Good Tanyas, Carolina Chocolate Drops and Po Girl.

Her fiddle playing, on the other hand, is jaw-droppingly good. The dexterity and emotion that she wrings out of the opener, the traditional 'Belle Election', and her own title track, 'The Newpart', are worth the price of admission alone. Not only does she accent her songs with sublime fiddle playing, but she also lays down a stepdancing percussion behind most of the songs and tunes (although the attractions of the stepdancing-only track, 'Gilchrist', soon wear thin). Clearly Ms Verch is nothing if not multi-talented.

So even if good 'ol boys in Stetsons isn't your sort of thing, you can be sure that country music is in safe hands with artists and albums as good as these.

Jonathan Roscoe