We only bring you the Cream of the Crop!

Joe Goldmark
Blue Steel
LO-VALL RECORDS

Goldmark is a new name to these ears, but he is a pedal steel guitarist from the San Francisco Bay area who got the bug to play the pedal steel from seeing Jerry Garcia play with the New Riders of the Purple Sage decades ago. He remained playing even after getting married and first having a pizza business and then became a partner at Amoeba Music, but all this time continued to play. There is a variety of supporting musicians with drummer Paul Rivelli being the most familiar to me. There are seven vocals here split between ex-Hoodoo Rhythm Devils lead singer Glenn Walters and chanteuse Dallis Craft, while long-time Goldmark compadre, Jim Campilongo, guests on electric guitar.

Despite the mix of roots, country, blues and soul, Goldmark’s playing sounds rooted mostly in the country tradition, as compared to the more vocalized steel guitar stylings of Sacred Steel players and Bay area bluesman Freddie Roulette. This is evident on the opening “Night Flight,” where he displays his clear delivery (and Gary Pullerton’s twangy tremolo guitar). After the easy to listen to opening track, things heat up with Walters blue-eyed soulful vocal on a rendition of Rufus Thomas’ “All Night Worker,” as Jeff Ervin’s baritone sax helps add to the bottom while Goldmark takes a crisp solo. Walters also is heard on a heated cover of Jimmy McCracklin’s “The Wobble” with some sizzling steel guitar and also B.B. King’s “Beautician Blues,” with some more astonishing steel guitar to go with Walters’ forceful singing.

The four vocals featuring Dallis Craft are in the vein of old-school country (think the Bakersfield School), starting with Jeffrey Lynne’s honky tonk ballad, “I Want To Be With You Forever”; Graham Parker’s “Howlin’ Wind,” which incorporates a reggae groove; Lefty Frizell’s honky tonk classic “Look What Thoughts Will Do”; and her lament “True Love Travels On a Gravel Road” that closes this recording. Among the other instrumentals, there is the lovely “Warm Rain,” a calypso infused arrangement of Bob Marley’s “Natty Dread,” and Jim Campilongo’s country waltz, “I Want To Be With You Forever.”

Very easy to listen too, this is a most appealing genre-crossing release that likely will have its greatest appeal to fans of old school country and Americana, but entertaining to anyone who might sample this tasty recording.

Ron Weinstock

Bill O’Connell
Jazz Latin
SAVANT RECORDS

Pianist O’Connell scores with his latest release with selections from his excellent trio, with Lincoln Goines on electric bass and Bobby Ameen on drums, with whom he played with in the Dave Valentin Band. Guests here include Randy Brecker, Craig Handy and Conrad Herwig. The eleven selections include seven originals and cover a range of styles and instrumentation.

The disc opens with a celebratory salute to the 44th President, “Obama Samba,” with all three soloing. There is a solid, hard swinging rendition of the Cole Porter standard “Just One of Those Things,” before O’Connell switches to electric piano with Craig Handy joining in for “It’s OK,” followed by the trio paying respects to their late leader Valentin on winsome reflective interpretation of Wayne Shorter’s “Footprints,” with Goines sounding excellent here. Next is a ballad that slowly builds its tempo, “Goodbye My Friend.” On this Brecker employs the lower register of his trumpet and after a very appealing piano solo and some excellent guitar from is heard from Daniel Carillo.

Flautist Andrea Brachfeld enhances “Quicksand,” with its percolating groove and skittering electric piano, while “Tip Toes” is a Monk influenced original with interesting intervals and chording with some of O’Connell’s most inspired playing. With Conrad Herwig adding his trombone, O’Connell provides a Latin arrangement for a dazzling reinvention of Irving Berlin’s “Puttin’ on the Ritz.” Ameen’s drumming is most
noteworthy here, along with an appropriately heated trombone solo from Herwig.

A tribute to his mother, “Mom’s Song,” includes some hauntingly beautiful guitar from Carillo along with O’Connell’s moving piano. Carillo is also on the jazz waltz interpretation of Antonio Carlos Jobim’s “Zingaro.” The brief, galloping original “What Is This,” brings to a close this outstanding recording.

Ron Weinstock

GUS SPENOS
It’s Lovin’ I Guarantee
SELF-PRODUCED

Gus Spenos is a sax-playing bluesman who plays and sings in the vein of the great blues shouters while also being a top neurologist in Indianapolis. This is his latest recording and he recorded it in Hoboken with a terrific big band that includes Wycliffe Gordon on trombone and Cecil Brooks III on drums. The rest of the rhythm section also includes Brandon McCune on keyboards and Brad Williams on guitar. Others present include Freddie Hendrix on trumpet, Bruce Williams on alto sax, and Jason Marshall on baritone sax. These gentleman along with Gordon, McCune and Williams are heard on solos throughout.

Spenos and his collaborator, Collin DeJoseph, wrote 4 originals and there are 9 covers here. DeJoseph, who also played piano, did the arrangements. This is solid jump blues that is wonderfully played with plenty of hot horn solos and tight rocking grooves. The originals, such as the title track and “Every Tic’s Got a Toc,” are solid originals in the jump blues tradition while the songs covered are not songs that have been covered to death.

Spenos is an adequate, if at times awkward sounding, singer who does invest a lot of spirit in his vocals although he is overshadowed by his inspirations. At the same time, the horns and band are wonderful with Gordon contributing some terrific growling trombone on Jimmy Rushing “Fool’s Blues,” where the leader takes one of several terrific booting tenor sax solos here. Guitarist Williams takes a fleet solo on TNT Tribble’s “She Walks Right In,” followed by Hendrix’ blistering trumpet. On Eddie Boyd’s “Hush Baby Don’t You Cry,” Jason Marshall’s burly baritone sax is followed by Gordon’s gutbucket play while McCune lays down some hot buttered fried soul on the B–3.

Brad Williams opens “Livin’ is a Crime” with some T-Bone Walker styled chords and then chords under Spe-
Wrong," and the moody, Muddy Waters’ styled "Final Verdict" with Kim Field’s harmonica as well as Murray’s deep down guitar.

Add the rollicking rock and roll of “All These Questions,” with Floyd Domino’s boogie inflected piano and the relaxed shuffle groove of “I Got This,” and one has a varied and entertaining, well-produced set of blues with a couple of roots rocker added for spice.

Ron Weinstock

**VINNY RANIOLO**

**Air Guitar: Songs of Flight**

**SELF-PRODUCED**

Guitarist Vinny Raniolo has collaborated with many folks including Tommy Emmanuel, Bucky Pizzarelli, Leon Redbone and Vince Giordano to name a few. He also has been the long-time partner of Frank Vignola with whom he has performed thousands of concerts.

“Air Guitar” is his first album under his own name and finds him in duets with bassist Elias Bailey. Heard are classic songs from Jimmy Van Heusen, Hoagy Carmichael, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Django Reinhardt and others that show his love of flying through performance of songs.

There is plenty to enjoy in the 15 selections on this from the brisk, lively opening “Come Fly With Me,” through the lovely, lyrical rendering of “Skylark.” Raniolo’s deft touch and lovely tone supported by Bailey’s bass. There is a lively “Flying Down To Rio,” as well as a charming “Blue Skies.” Raniolo crafts melodic solos throughout as on “Stardust” and John Denver’s “Leaving on a Jet Plane.” Then there are the sparkingly played “Airmail Special,” as well as another Benny Goodman small group classic “Flying Home.” The interplay between Raniolo and Bailey on the former number is noteworthy, as is his horn like lines on the latter tune. There is also an exquisite interpretation of Django Reinhardt’s “Nuages.”

Raniolo and Bailey have provided listeners here with a superb album of jazz guitar-bass duets to captivate listeners. 

Ron Weinstock

**THE CLAUDETTES**

**Dance Scandal At The Gymnasium**

**YELLOW DOG RECORDS**

Over the course of their three-disc career The Claudettes have evolved from a piano and drum instrumental duo to a four-piece featuring piano, drums, bass, guitar and vocals from three members.

While the instrumentation is still spare with a blues punk foundation the fuller sound gives the band room to explore more territory. With singer Berit Ulseth channeling Exene Cervenka of X or Natalie Merchant and the male vocalists (Johnny Iguana and Zach Verdoorn) adding lower register grit, the band powers through art-rock, “November,” rock, “Don’t Stay With Me” and “Naked On the Internet” and pop, “Pull Closer To Me” and “Give It All Up For Good.” The title track is a rocking instrumental while “Bill Played Saxophone” recalls mid-60’s Brit-pop with its soaring harmonies, and “Influential Farmers” and “Utterly Absurd” each venture into psychobilly territory with their stop/go rhythms and mash-up of vocals and instruments.

No scandal here. This is great stuff. Mark Smith

**JARED GOLD**

**Reemergence**

**STRIKEZONE**

Organist Gold has been a significant part of guitarist Dave Stryker’s organ trio along with drummer McClenty Hunter. Among the more recent group of jazz organists, Gold has become a significant part of the NY jazz scene playing with such heavyweights as Oliver Lake and the late John Abercrombie along with Stryker. He has recorded 8 albums, although it
has been three years since his last as a leader. On this recording, produced by Stryker, legendary drummer Billy Hart joins the pair (and it is a working trio), with trumpeter Jeremy Pelt adding his brass to three of the nine selections. Gold contributed two originals to this recording with others coming from Gershwin, Stevie Wonder, Ornette Coleman, Doris Akers and Lennon and McCartney.

From Jared’s opening title track to the closing “Nomad” by Stryker, Gold and his organ trio certainly delight organ jazz fans, starting with the unusual blues as Pelt’s vibrant trumpet adds fire to the unusual burning blues line. Gershwin’s “It Ain’t Necessarily So” displays his melodicism as well as orchestral sound while providing a strong setting for Stryker’s dazzling playing. There is a wistful reading of The Beatles’ “She’s Leaving Home” and Pelt is present on “Looking For Another Pure Love,” contrasting with the solid funk of “One For John A,” where Pelt adds his trumpet to Gold’s chicken shack grease. Hart provides a light Brazilian groove to “How Long Has This Been Getting On,” which is followed by a slowed down rendition of Ornette Coleman’s “Blues Connotation,” where Gold’s use of dynamics adds to the impressiveness of the trio’s performance.

While organ jazz might be viewed by some as jazz comfort food, one cannot deny how outstanding Jared Gold and trio are on this superb recording.

Ron Weinstock

WILLIE JACKSON
Chosen By the Blues
SELF-PRODUCED

Savannah, Georgia based Willie Jackson is a full-throated blues shouter backed by a solid, efficient band. On this self-produced release he is backed by Jon Willis on bass, Dillon Young on guitar, Paxton Eugene on drums and Ace Anderson on harmonica. This is an EP with 6 straight-forward originals with a definite down-home flavor from Jackson’s brawny baritone that is full of humor, his fine lyrics and the simple backing, especially Anderson’s atmospheric harmonica.

He can be a clever lyricist as in his use of a fishing metaphor on “I’ll Throw You Back,” as he tells his woman she may think she’s hot but wait till Willie gets her in his frying pan. Then when his woman isn’t fulfill-

PETER ERSKINE & THE DR. UM BAND
On Call
FUZZY MUSIC

Weather Report alum drummer Peter Erskine’s current outfit shows much of that seminal fusion group’s mojo on this double-disc offering. WR’s sense of swing and sophisticated funk distinguished it from the pack of early fusionists and appears to inform tracks here as keyboardist John Beasley’s “If So Then” and saxophonist Bob Sheppard’s “Might As Well Be”. This is not to short-sell the band’s own character which frequently shows up on the smarter end of the “smooth” spectrum, such as on Erskine’s lilting ballad “Uncle Don”.

The tight, tasty character of the studio disc gives way to an understandably wider open posture on the “live” set. Not to belabor comparisons but it’s hard not to hear early Joe Zawinul from the get-go on Erskine’s soulful “Hipnotherapy”. Standing out on disc two also is a dreamy, airplay-friendly take on Henry Mancini’s “Dreamville”.

Duane Verh

TERESA JAMES AND THE RHYTHM TRAMPS
Here in Babylon
JESSII-LU RECORDS

This is the tenth album by the Houston born blues and roots singer Teresa James. Reviewing her last recording I stated that she had “a slight bit of sandpaper
in her voice that adds to its grit and character,” and that “she is a singer, not a shouter.” Her performances on this new recording lead me to repeat my praises of her. On this her vocals and keyboards are backed by her longtime partner, Terry Wilson, on bass and Billy Watts on guitars along with drummer Jay Bellerose. Mike Finnigan’s organ and the horns of Darrell Leonard’s trumpet and Joe Sublett’s sax are also on several tracks.

The songs are all originals with Terry Wilson involved with eleven of the twelve songs and they are marvelously performed. There is the slinky sexiness of the opening “I Know I Ain’t Been Perfect,” the evocative title track with Bellerose’s drums and Wilson’s echoey, stinging guitar; the second line in molasses groove of “Give Me a Holler”; the sweet, soulful “Hold On,” and the driving rock and roll of “I Got To Roll.” With this group of strongly performed material, one highpoint may be the superb tribute to the late Gregg Allman, “The Day The Blues Came To Call,” with a simple, evocative backing where she displays her vocal and dynamic range.

Mixing intriguing originals with terrific singing and backing along with solid production, Teresa James and the Rhythm Tramps score again with this terrific blues and roots release.

Ron Weinstock

Laurie Morvan is a triple threat performer writing and singing her own songs and leading her band on lead guitar. This, her sixth disc, mostly leaves her road band behind in favor of studio aces such as Tony Braunagel on drums, Mike Finnigan on B3, Jim Pugh on keys and Bob Glaub on bass.

The disc kicks into high speed right away with the thumping intro to the clever “My Moderation” where Morvan notes that even moderation needs to be done in moderation. While “Twice the Trouble” walks down the well-worn path of lovers who aren’t worth the investment, “Money Talks” finds Morvan alone and musing that even though money talks she can’t even start a conversation, and “Stay With Me” features her pitch to

Ron Weinstock

MCCLENTY HUNTER JR.
The Groove Hunter
STRIKEZONE

Familiar to this writer as a member of Dave Stryker’s organ trio, drummer McClenty Hunter Jr. studied at Howard University with Grady Tate and Juilliard with Carl Allen. He was a member of Kenny Garrett’s Quintet and has played with Lou Donaldson, Eric Reed, Curtis Fuller, Javon Jackson and others in addition to Stryker. I believe “The Groove Hunter” is his first recording as a leader. Produced by Stryker and Hunter, there are some serious players to be heard here including pianists Eric Reed and Christian Sands; bassists Corcoran Holt and Eric Wheeler; guitarist Stryker; trumpeter Eddie Henderson; alto saxophonist Donald Harrison; and tenor saxophonist Stacy Dillard. They collaborate in various combinations on the four Hunter compositions and five interpretations heard here.

There is plenty of fire with Eric Reed dazzling on piano for a driving, fiery trip on a take of Herbie Nichols’ “Blue Chopsticks,” with Holt anchoring the performance with Hunter pushing the heated groove. In contrast, Reed is exquisite on Hunter’s, “My Love,” shifting from a lovely ballad mode to comping behind Dillard’s robust, burning tenor sax and then soloing in a Tyner-esque fashion. Wayne Shorter’s “The Big Push” has all three of the horns along with Reed and Holt. Dillard’s robust tenor sax is impressive while Dr. Henderson delights with his attack. There are also strong statements from Reed and Harrison who plays in a turbulent manner. Stryker is featured on the rendition of Stevie Wonder’s “That Girl,” with Sands also outstanding on this bouncy performance. Gary McFarland’s “Sack Full of Dreams” is a feature for some lovely, deliberate playing from pianist Sands and guitarist Stryker, with Hunter employing a light touch. Hunter’s drums kick off a brisk version of John Coltrane’s “Countdown,” with Harrison’s riveting alto sax with a good portion of the performance being a duet with Hunter before Reed and Holt join in.

Dillard’s soprano sax is supported by Reed, Holt and Hunter on the leader’s composition, “Give Thanks,” on a lovely spiritually rooted performance. It is the close of a fascinating and enthralling recording by Hunter, who shows himself to be a composer of note as well as a marvelous musician who is joined by a superb cast of supporting musicians.

Ron Weinstock
urban blues, while Billy Branch channels the second Sonny Boy Williamson to enliven a relaxed shuffle, "Doctor From the Hood." "Fall in British Columbia" is an atmospheric, wistful ballad with a lovely trumpet solo, while set against Foreman’s greasy organ, Rodio conjures up Albert Collins on a strong original, "One of a Kind." Branch adds some strong harmonica and shares the vocal with Rodio on the closing "Chicago Is Loaded With the Blues.”

Some may find Breezy Rodio’s vocals a bit harsh and the original songs are uneven, but he performs with passion and is a terrific guitarist. He is handsomely supported on wonderfully played, if perhaps imperfect performances.  

Ron Weinstock

ANGELO DIVINO
Love A To Z
SELF PRODUCED

A veteran of the jazz and cabaret scene which included performing with the Duke Ellington Legacy Band, writing and performing in a show devoted to the Ellington legacy and later did the same with respect to the Frank Sinatra legacy. In Los Angeles he began an association with the very fine Barbara Morrison. The present album has all original songs from A to Z, overall that relate to the many facets of love. Backing Divino are Rich Eames on piano and keyboards; Adrian Rosen on bass; Michael Rosen on drums and harmonica; Doug Webb on saxophone; and Jonathan Dane on trumpet, cornet and flugelhorn.

While I am not enamored with the songs, I do find plenty in charm with Divino’s singing. His relaxed delivery, intonation, pitch, phrasing and the clarity of his enunciation have an engaging quality as does the backing band. There’s Webb’s tenor on the opening “Hey Life,” while pianist Eames shines in his light accompaniment on the lament, “About Last Night,” with Dane’s lovely flugelhorn solo. There is the playful “Fun and Games,” and his plaintive vocal on “Strangers Again” with Dane’s fine muted trumpet.

Other songs include the amusing, and buoyant “Flying Saucers,” with Eames featured on keyboards, and another wistful song, “I Love You, Goodbye,” the lovely reflective “I Remember” with Michael Rosen’s atmospheric harmonica, and “Love Is a Place To Stay,” with a light, Brazilian groove.

There is much to enjoy here in Divino’s warm, relaxed singing and the solid, supportive backing Angelo Divino receives. The only fault I might point to is (what I find to be) uninspiring originals, that he so ably performs. Angelo Divino is a singer I hope to hear from again.  

Ron Weinstock

ROCKWELL AVENUE BLUES BAND

Back to Chicago
DELMARK RECORDS

As keyboardist and vocalist Ken Saydak observes that the title of this album is a fitting title for veterans of the Windy City’s blues scene who came together for this project. The title of the band is also a nod to Delmark Records North Rockwell address.

Saydak was joined by guitarist and vocalist Steve Freund, harmonica player and vocalist Tad Robinson, bassist Harlan Terson and drummer Marty Binder. Collectively they have played with and recorded with Chicago legends like Big Walter Horton, Sunnyland Slim, Otis Rush, Lonnie Brooks, Albert Collins, Junior Wells, Koko Taylor and Buddy Guy. Saydak, Freund and Robinson also have established well regarded solo careers and each are featured on five vocals and they, along with bassist Terson, contribute to the originals here, with one song a collaboration between Mary-Ann Brandon, Fred James and Saydak, and there is one Elmore James cover.

One should be not surprised by the strong music heard here. This is one terrific band with the three frontmen all getting plenty of solo space. Robinson is particularly impressive with his harmonica playing here, such as his sax-like backing between Saydak’s vocal on “That Face,” a performance that featured Saydak’s strong singing that has tonal qualities (but not the country drawl) of Elvin Bishop. At the same time, Robinson plays more in a Junior Parker vein on the soulful “Free To Love Again,” Freund channels Robert Nighthawk on his terrific slow blues “Lonesome Flight.” In addition to his strong singing and guitar, the band is superb with Saydak pounding the ivories while one cannot praise Terson and Binder enough as they anchor this and the entire recording.

Saydak’s “Chariot Gate” evokes early James Cot-