

playlist

FEATURED REVIEW

RUTHIE FOSTER

The Phenomenal Ruthie Foster
(Blue Corn Music)

the phenomenal

Ruthie Foster

Ruthie Foster is one of those artists whose immense talent covers such a broad swath of stylistic ground it's scary. Well-known as a folksinger, Foster's music so effortlessly blurs the lines between folk, gospel, blues, pop, country, soul – whatever – that boundaries become meaningless. Blessed with a huge voice, an instrument of rare power and precision, Foster is never guilty of simply browsing; she masters everything she tackles.

With *The Phenomenal Ruthie Foster*, her fifth record and third from Blue Corn Music, she shows how naturally she can give up the gospel a la Mahalia, shake up the soul like Aretha, or dig deep into the blues the way Big Mama Thornton once did.

On "Phenomenal Women," Foster turns Maya Angelou's words into a powerful manifesto of empowerment. The Lucinda Williams cover, "Fruits of My Labor," is pop perfection. "Grinnin' in Your Face," by blues great Son House, is an a cappella tour de force. Foster, who contributes six original songs to the album, is a fine writer as well.

She practically channels Aretha Franklin on "Heal Yourself." "Mama Said" is irresistible country blues with a gospel message, and "Beaver Creek Blues," written with longtime partner Cyd Cassone, is a raucous blues throwdown urged along by amusing cricket and bullfrog effects.

The Phenomenal Ruthie Foster should convince anyone who had any reason to doubt that Ruthie Foster is, indeed, phenomenal.

– patrick cosgrove



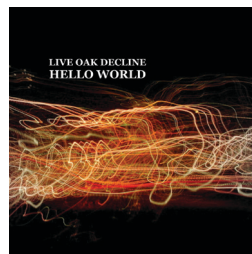
BILL KIRCHEN

Hammer of the Honky-Tonk Gods

(Proper Records)

Having made a name for himself in the '70s with Commander Cody & His Lost Planet Airmen, and lauded by Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Elvis Costello and the Grateful Dead (among many others), Kirchen's musical skills helped architect the merging of rock 'n roll and honky tonk. The prolific performer, vocalist, guitar (and trombone and banjo) player offers a brand new release, *Hammer of the Honky-Tonk Gods*, just in case there was any doubt. A solid endeavor featuring swinging guitar riffs and funky, honest rhythms, the album is further evidence why Grammy-nominated Kirchen is considered a Telecaster master. The opening title track plunges listeners into good ol' boy (or girl) status upon hearing the first chords, while the second track, "Rocks Into Sand," slows things down a bit with thoughtful lyrics; Kirchen's earnest, experienced crooning keeping you firmly in its grip. All fifteen cuts make for great listening, finding a way to please fans of literally any genre of music. The only way to submerge further into Kirchen's unique world would be to see him live. Since Austin is his home base of sorts these days, that just might be in the cards.

– hillary r. skaff



LIVE OAK DECLINE

Hello World

(self-released)

This Austin-original rock band may be debuting its first full-length album, *Hello World*, but band members Greg Combs, Keld Ewart, Steve Littleton and Noah Watson are in no way freshman as career musicians. Having performed and recorded with such touring acts as Medicine Show, Dexter Freebish and Django Walker, Live Oak Decline's quartet of indie rockers come through with heartfelt tunes that can be previewed even by just reading their titles. "A Song to Fall Asleep To" and "Sweet Oxygen" are two such examples. These songs wrench the heart with all the gusto of a reflective, beer-drinkin' stoner grooving to a good country ballad at the end of the night. Faster tracks like "Does Anything Ever Change," "Sweet Oxygen" and the innovative "Too Many Dollars" kick up the energy without betraying their poetic lyrical niche. One is reminded of Tom Petty, Cake and perhaps The Jayhawks or Soul Coughing, but this band's warm, smooth vocals, layered with their accomplished blend of piano, bass, guitar and drums, give them an eclectic sound all their own.

– hillary r. skaff



ELANA JAMES

Elana James

(Snarf Records)

When Hot Club of Cowtown disbanded in 2005, western swing fans the world over moaned. Thinking positively, though, it meant the trio of talented musicians would pursue their own projects. The excellence of Elana James' (formerly Fremerman) first recording as leader is no surprise; James is as good a swing fiddle player as there is today. Beyond skill, her energetic charm permeates the music and her vocals are endearing. Beau Sample's bass walks the melodies along their course as Austin gypsy jazz maestro Dave Biller handles the majority of the guitar with his typical flourish of brilliance and tact. While it never seemed her past trio lacked anything, Joe Kerr's piano is like adding ice cream to a homemade pie. It may very well lift *Elana James* above Hot Club's stellar output (mix up the vocals just a tad, and it's a done deal). James wrote six of the baker's dozen cuts, including many highlights such as the bouncing "Run Away With Me," with playfully plinking transitions that suggest the entreated is indeed tiptoeing with her, and the perfectly arranged "Down the Line," churning full-steam behind a familiar fiddle call and momentum-building background vocals, as well as the delightful instrumental, "Eva's Waltz."

– danté dominick