

more mediocre tracks, the musicianship is stellar and LeAnn Rimes' voice is spectacular.

—Gino Misasi



**SEAN COSTELLO**

*We Can Get Together*  
(Delta Groove Records)  
Maturity is a difficult word to put into context regarding

Sean Costello. After all, the self-taught guitarist was playing alongside B.B. King at age 14, having won the Beale Street Blues Society's young talent award. He played lead at age 18 in Susan Tedeschi's touring band behind her impressive *Just Won't Burn* debut. His *Tone Cool* debut, released at age 25, caught the ears of critics and fans alike. He has shared the stage with Buddy Guy, Hubert Sumlin, Pinetop Perkins, James Cotton, Bo Diddley, and Levon Helm.

Now he has re-emerged on the prominent West Coast blues label, Delta Groove. Costello continues to hone his skills as a songwriter, explaining that "right now I'm equally driven towards writing songs and expanding my vocal direction." His incendiary guitar work is very much in the forefront as well as his soulful, gritty vocals. It's an intoxicating mix of classic blues riffs with soul, funk, and gospel touches. Nine of the eleven tunes were written or co-written by Costello, appearing with covers of the gospel traditional "Going Home" and "Little Birds" (taught to Costello by Levon Helm and appearing on Helm's *Dirt Farmer*). Most of these are hard, driving tunes, but "Told Me a Lie" stands apart for his slow-burning, anguished vocal, replete with background choir.

Parts of "Little Birds" sound like Pops Staples, with the electric guitar underpinnings, but maybe it's just because we're used to Helm's acoustic version. As Costello says, "I'll never play the blues better than the people who invented it...I'm 28 years old and I need to make my own statement." Whatever happened during his hiatus, Costello has found the knack again. This is gutsy, burning stuff that gets better with each listen.

—Jim Hynes



**LIZ TORMES**

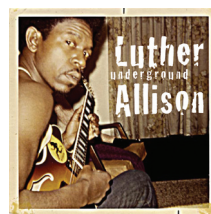
*Limelight*  
(Velour Recordings)  
Wisdom and innocence exist side-by-side in Liz Tormes' voice and in

her songs. Her emotional but unsentimental sketches of the vagaries of love are clearly personal, and they conjure up feelings that are sadly familiar, although we may have mercifully forgotten the details. On *Limelight*, Tormes provides just enough of her own feelings to gently probe the leaps of faith and logic people employ to justify unwise and sometimes dangerous connections. On this self-produced debut, her lovely, hypnotic voice proves the ideal vehicle to explore the mysterious territories of heart and soul.

Tormes spins her haunting tales with the help of some great New York musicians and singers, and with a wide range of rhythmic feel. It's worth noting that her contribution to her first band was not songs or singing, but her "innate sense of musical timing." The CD's title track is a lilting country waltz, sung like a whispery spell, while "Black Luck" is an eerie dirge floating over Tormes' mournful musings on a relationship's demise. "Better Days" is a sweet shuffle distinguished by melancholy harmonies from Amy Helm, and "Fall Silent" sports military-style drums and a cool bass line from Dan Green. On "Maybe You Won't," Tormes' percussive guitar is the only accompaniment to her edgy vocal duet with Teddy Thompson.

Tormes plays acoustic guitar and keyboards in the band that includes Jason Crigler, whose electric guitar punctuates her messages, starting with his first circling, then soaring turn on "Read My Mind." Tormes sings unflinchingly and her melodies always mirror the emotions they describe. And within her elegant lyrics lies much simple wisdom: "So face the wind/And stay on track/Stop loving things/that don't love back." You could pay a lot of shrink money for such good advice.

—Kay Cordtz



**LUTHER ALLISON**

*Underground*  
(Ruf Records)

Some people relish the polished blues of artists like B.B.

King and Robert Cray. Others delight in the carnival showmanship of Buddy Guy. But the true disciples of the blues know what it's like to dig deeper, into the back street clubs of Chicago and the juke joints of Mississippi, to unearth the likes of cats like Magic Sam, Elmore James, Freddie King and Luther Allison. Not to take anything away from B.B. or Buddy (they started there too), but these guys lived this life to the very end.

Luther Allison was not only one of the most incendiary blues guitarists of all time, he was also one of the most endearing people to ever grace this earth. His four-hour shows were legendary and his connection with his audience was sincere and deep. Allison passed away in the summer of '97 but left behind a stunning legacy of blues, including *Underground*. The liner notes incorrectly date these recordings as Allison's first, 1958 (they were actually his second, and from 1968), but that's not important. What is important is that *Underground* is a raw, wicked window into the beginnings of a true bluesman.

Clocking in at less than 30 minutes, *Underground* still delivers more gut-wrenching blues guitar and vocals (oh man, those vocals) than most albums twice its length. The funky slide of "Don't Start Me Talking," the slow torment of "Drivin' Wheel," and the rockin' swagger of "Cut You Loose" stand out among *Underground's* eight tracks, but the entire CD is a lesson in the way the blues were meant to be played, and heard.

—Steve Walbridge