

ALASTAIR MOOCK

A Cow Says Moock

Moockshake

If I had kids, this would be the album I'd want them to have. Clearly, Alastair felt the same way, as it was the birth of his twin daughters that inspired him to put together this project, with perhaps the first song he wrote for them, "Two Little Babies," planting the initial seed several years ago. An impressive artist who has garnered much praise over the past 15 years playing festivals, concerts and coffeehouses, Alastair found his "inner child" to put together a total blast of a children's CD, one with groove. It's something the parents will reach for as well, because they'll be craving it for themselves.

With his funky and rootsy vocals, children won't be afraid to sing along; they are sure to smile the whole time. Moock fills out this good-time recording with everything from mandolin to lap steel to trumpets. With this diverse backing, a performance of Alastair's *A Cow Says Moock* would fit equally well in your living room or at the prestigious New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival – it's just that cool.

Though it's truly hard to pick favorites, three of the many stand outs include Moock's lighter touch with the Taj Mahal hit "Fishin' Blues"; his Tom Waits-esque ballad "Yllabul"; and the wonderfully handled "Two Mommies," which takes on "traditional" families and broadens the scope beautifully. With lots of humor, conscious intention and great musicianship and presentation, *A Cow Says Moock* warrants the respect of anyone who listens to this CD. And it's also just total fun. Something tells me that Alastair's kids will be fronting their own band in no time! — KE

CLAUDIA SCHMIDT AND HER FUNTET

Promising Sky

Claudia Schmidt

Long before Susan Werner, Vance Gilbert and others began to incorporate jazz into the folk idiom, Claudia Schmidt fearlessly straddled and blurred that line. After 10 albums of jazz-inflected folk balladry, performed on 12-string guitar and dulcimer, she cut loose as a jazz/blues chanteuse on 2001's *Live at The Old Rectory Pub*, and since then has followed her eclectic muse – writing for musical theater, recording tributes to Duke Ellington and George Gershwin, and releasing a spoken-word album of her poems and essays. *Promising Sky*, Claudia's first album of original material since 2006, is a robust collection

of the many musical styles that inspire this exuberant performer.

One feature that classic folk and jazz standards share is that every song has a clear and solid theme. The same is true here. "Can't Get Yourself Out of Love," a Tin Pan Alley confection, considers the fellow who can escape every situation except love. "What Luck's Been Up To" is a pop/rock celebration of "all the near-misses" in life. "If All Goes Well" is a prayer-like anthem to wishes coming true. The album also includes the "I'm a Woman"-like bluesy "Missy Ma'am"; the mythic, poem-like "Ubumama," a tribute to an organization devoted to ending maternal death worldwide; a mandolin-driven instrumental ("Meelie's Waltz"); a fun bossa nova ("Sea of Love"); and a cover of the Carl Fischer/Frankie Laine jazz standard "We'll Be Together Again."

Claudia is joined by what she calls her "Funtet" of Michigan-based musicians – lead guitarist Ron Getz, mandolinist/producer Don Julin and bassist Jack Dryden – who play easily in multiple genres. Other musicians on the album include singer-songwriter Rachael Davis on harmony vocals and Randy Marsh on understated, whispery percussion. The group provides spare, jazzy arrangements, alternating between snappy solos (Nancy Stagnitta's flute on "Sea of Love" and Getz's mandolin on "Meelie's Waltz") and solid rhythm backing. — SS

JAMES GORDON

My Stars Your Eyes

Borealis 200

James Gordon delivers another dozen new songs like an arrangement of mixed bright blossoms from a particularly fine florist. This album is once again a family project, produced and engineered with his son Evan, and accompanied by sons Evan and Geordie on a variety of instruments, with occasional harmonies from Katherine Wheatley and Jude Vadala, and fiddle from Sandra Swannell (most recently with Tanglefoot). The beauty of a Gordon bouquet is that he mixes up a wide variety of subjects and sounds. The production varies from solo voice and guitar to a full but not overwhelming pop groove. He goes from the heartbreaking "Virtue Jane," about an orphan who dies after becoming a prostitute at a very young age, to the rollicking true story "The Great Duncan Heist," about a pair of street punks who ripped off his CDs during a show and ended up liking them. I'll save the boffo punch line for when you listen to the CD, but it is a joy to

have a self-effacing songwriter with a great sense of humor, always one of Gordon's trademarks. He keeps up with social commentary with "Kelvenator," using the refrigerator as a symbol for the negative changes in our society. Similarly, "Whistlewing" comments on pollution and destruction of the environment. Gordon has also penned some fine love songs, most with water or celestial imagery. He's been at this for many years, yet this CD sounds fresh and, most importantly, entertaining. — RWarr



DEVON SPROULE

Don't Hurry For Heaven!

Black Hen 0060

Like a Joni Mitchell or a Rickie Lee Jones, Devon Sproule makes distinctive and uncompromising music that expresses her unique sensibility and vision. Her quivery, almost childlike singing harkens back to a classic scratchy country record played on a Victrola phonograph. Defying genre, her melodies touch on Gospel, Appalachian and old-timey jazz figures but then veer off into unexpected chord changes and hints of reggae or African rhythms. Her songs take a sly and irreverent but warmly amused look at ordinary domestic life, with lyrics that meander conversationally rather than telling a story from front to back.

Some of the songs are simple snapshots: "Healthy Parents, Happy Couple" describes a family drive; "A Picture of Us in the Garden" is a meandering conversation among friends in a backyard; and "Good to Get Out" is a high-octane road song. Some tell more of a story: "Julie" is an elegiac memory piece about a college friend, and "You Need a Maria" is a bit of romantic advice, explaining the consequences when "you don't do it right when the right one goes by." There is also a honey-dipped, countrified cover of Black Uhuru's "Sponji Reggae."

The album was recorded in Northamptonshire, England, with Devon's road band, and is produced by Devon's husband, Paul Curreri, who also adds keyboards, guitar, banjo and vocals. British pedal-steel virtuoso B.J. Cole, whose credits run from Elton John to R.E.M. to Sting, adds a yearning sound that complements the songs perfectly. — SS