

Reviews

record's centerpiece "Brush Up Against You," a more-or-less instrumental blues undertaking that teeters on the avant-garde. Finally, the whole thing wraps up with a tribute to Osborne's New Orleans blues roots, a modern reimagining of James Wayne's "Junco Partner." It's a solid effort all around that, more than anything, comes off as a testament to the power of the low-key, carefree jam session.

Sam D'Arcangelo

Nicki Bluhm & The Gramblers

Loved Wild Lost LITTLE SUR



Nicki Bluhm comes across as a modern country troubadour who's been schooled in traditional trappings. Her easygoing

demeanour blends contemporary attitude with down-home distinction. With hubby **Tim Bluhm** (of The Mother Hips) and her band **The Gramblers** in tow, Bluhm takes her inspiration from both Bakersfield and the backwoods, singing songs about hard-living women and eager party gals, while rarely discerning any difference between the two. *Loved Wild Lost* also finds a fair amount of twang striked into the brew, particularly on tracks like "Simpler Times," "Only Always" and "Love Your Loved Ones," and indeed, every song offers some variation of a homespun design. There's also a certain reverence at work here, as evidenced on the album's gospel-flavored send-off, "Heavy Hey Ya." Sweet, sassy and celebratory, *Loved Wild Lost* captures Bluhm at her best.

Lee Zimmerman

Sister Sparrow & The Dirty Birds

The Weather Below PARTY FOWL/ THIRTY TIGERS



Sister Sparrow & The Dirty Birds perfect their take on soul revivalism with their newest release, *The Weather Below*. The

album, produced by **Ryan Hadlock** (The Lumineers, Vance Joy), opens with a pair of funky party starters in the blaring "Borderline" and the low-key, yet equally festive, "Sugar." "Prison Cells" is an enjoyable, though slower, burn before the group delivers the record's first single—and best track—"Mama Knows." Singer **Arleigh Kincheloe** is at her sultry, soulful best every time she digs into that, "If you ain't got love, you ain't got nothing" refrain. The album takes a turn on "Disappear" and "Every Road," two songs with decidedly pop choruses that would make for bona fide radio hits if they lived in Kelly Clarkson's corner of the world. The tracks sit adjacent to other highlights—the ultra-smooth "Don't Be Jealous" and the pulsing "We Need a Love"—and the record closes out with the cool and confident "Catch Me If You Can." All in all, it's a solid collection of tunes that are tied together by Kincheloe's vocal prowess, a tight rhythm section and some filthy horn layers. *Sam D'Arcangelo*

Houndmouth

Little Neon Lighthouse ROUGH TRADE



Sophomore LPs aren't supposed to sound this effortless and confident, but that's precisely the way that Indiana-based rockers

Houndmouth sound on their follow-up to

2013's wildly popular *From the Hills Below the City*. This isn't just a band rolling over the successes of their debut, but rather an ensemble harnessing and expanding their sound with supreme confidence. Along with tracks that recall the slick, foot-stomping, roots rock created on their debut ("Sedona," "Honey Slider"), the quartet experiments with a rawer, garage-rock sound ("15 Years," "By God") brimming with the honesty and energy of their live performance. Thematically, honesty is all over this record—almost in a defiant manner—as guitarist **Matt Myers** exclaims on the delicate "For No One," "Sing a song for you, but I sing for no one." *Rob Slater*

Unknown Mortal Orchestra

Multi-Love SECRETLY CANADIAN



Portland-via-New Zealand trio **Unknown Mortal Orchestra** have shaded their work with R&B colors since the beginnings, but

with *Multi-Love*, bandleader **Ruban Nielson** fully unleashes his inner Prince—transmitting his careening falsetto over synth-washed funk on the majestic album-opener "Multi-Love." "She don't want to be a man or a woman/ she wants to be your love," Nielson sings, his voice sounding charmingly alien and slightly distorted. When the bridge hits, it sounds almost like something Jamal Lyon might sing during an episode of *Empire*. The breakbeats and grooves here feel lived-in, warm and genuine: "Like Acid Rain" sounds like Ariel Pink at his most earnest, and on "The World Is Crowded" Nielson struts like he's got D'Angelo's *Black Messiah* pumping in his earbuds. UMO aren't afraid to shake it up on songs like "Can't Keep Checking My Phone," with its electronic pulse, and "Puzzles," which features the album's heaviest guitars before settling into a quiet finish. The album excels when it blends all of its influences, like on "Necessary Evil," the record's best song. Nielson and Co. employ smooth lounge horns before steering the song's soul-pop sound into a heady, synth-led progressive rock detour—it's heavy, soulful and agile.

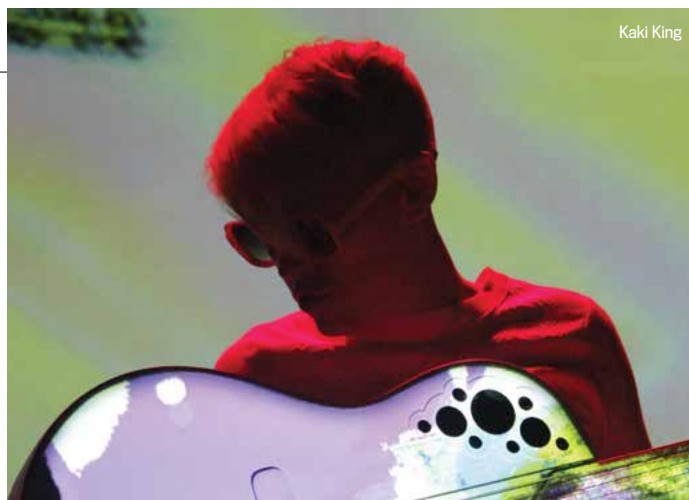
Jason Woodbury

Built To Spill

Untethered Moon WARNER BROS.



As far as indie bands go, **Built To Spill** has fared remarkably well in the larger marketplace. Since signing with a major label nearly 20 years ago—an impressive feat for any band of their ilk—they've scored any number of successful albums while still managing to tour consistently, garnering the ongoing support of both their record company and their devoted following in the process. Not surprisingly then, *Untethered Moon*, the group's first new offering since 2009's well-received *There Is No Enemy*, showcases a band that's revived and resolute, chock-full of assertive riffs and sizzling rhythms. The opening salvo of "All Our Songs" sets the mood, a fearsome combination of bombastic guitars and screeching vocals that likens Built To Spill to the aural equivalent of a ticking time bomb. Echoes of their prime influences—Pavement, Crazy Horse and Dinosaur



Kaki King

Jr.—are evident throughout, especially in the combined melody and mayhem that defines "Living Zoo," "On The Way" and "Another Day." Along the way, they give listeners plenty to connect with as far as recurrent refrains and fist-pumping exhortations are concerned. Call it controlled excess or unrepentant rock. *Untethered Moon* falls just short of coming unhinged. *Lee Zimmerman*

The Mountain Goats

Beat The Champ MERGE



Wrestling, in all its permutations—with the world, in the mind, on the canvas—is the theme of **The Mountain Goats'** 15th studio

album, and it comes across as more of a close-quarters, drawn-out grapple than a flying body slam. Since the early lo-fi experimental days of the MGs, founder and frontman **John Darnielle** has made his weird folk bacon purveying endless layers of meaning. *Beat The Champ's* narrative thread unspools with the feel of a staged musical ("Fire Editorial," with its Broadway jazz dynamics, jumps out), but each song stands on its own, from the upbeat and heroic "The Legend of Chavo Guerrero" to the violent snapshots of the hauntingly quiet "Hair Match" ("Cheap electric razor from the thrifty down the street/ Two guys down around your ankles so you'll stay put in your seat..."). Bassist **Peter Hughes** and drummer **Jon Wurster** also lend a solid and seamless backing to Darnielle's acoustic guitars and piano, making this not just an expertly crafted Goats album, but an impeccably recorded one, too. *Bill Murphy*

Beth Hart

Better Than Home PROVOQUE



Beth Hart has made quite a name for herself in the 15-plus years since her single "LA Song (Out of This Town)" gained international

recognition and garnered placement on an episode of *Beverly Hills 90210*. With several songs topping the blues charts, collaborations with both Jeff Beck and Joe Bonamassa, and various Grammy nominations to her credit, Hart's success seemed assured. On *Better Than Home*, she makes good on that promise, delivering a veritable tour-de-force that highlights her remarkable prowess as both a singer and a songwriter. Little wonder then that opening track "Might As Well Smile" projects unbridled optimism. ("I woke up this morning/ With a smile on my face/ I threw out those stones/ That

stood in my way.") And while succeeding songs take a more subdued turn, from the troubled tone of "Tell 'Em to Hold On" to the moving, melodic ballads "St. Teresa" and "Better Than Home," Hart's assurance and determination are always evident. When, in the defiant "Tell Her You Belong to Me," she implores an unfaithful lover to reject her rival's advances, she remains resolute ("No, she'll never win/ 'Cause I'm not giving in..."). Hart's songs sound like standards, and she makes it clear that she's a star. *Lee Zimmerman*

Sufjan Stevens

Carrie & Lowell ASTHMATIC KITTY



Whether he's writing orchestral indie-rock epics about American expansion ("Come on, feel the Illinois!") or intimate folk ballads about spiritual liberation ("To Be Alone with You"), **Sufjan Stevens** is a frequently flamboyant storyteller—wringing emotional clarity from unpredictable sounds and subject matter. But he takes a more linear approach on his seventh LP, *Carrie & Lowell*, channeling the grief from his mother's death into 11 heart-wrenching acoustic meditations. The album—named after Stevens' late mom and his label/partner's stepfather—was largely recorded in the singer-songwriter's Brooklyn office studio. The arrangements are suitably sparse with guitar and banjo plucks, an occasional piano chord, the distant hum of an air conditioner—none of the fluttering woodwinds or electronic avalanches that defined 2010's *The Age of Adz*. "What is that song you sing for the dead?" Stevens asks on opener "Death With Dignity," his boyish tenor backed by fingerpicked chords and encouraging choral voices. He spends 44 minutes attempting to answer that question—from the crescendoing "Should Have Known Better" to the faded photograph reverie "Eugene." The catharsis is staggering. *Ryan Reed*

Kaki King

The Neck Is a Bridge to the Body

SHORT STUFF



On her Kickstarter page seeking initial financing for the project, **Kaki King** writes, "*The Neck Is a Bridge to the Body* is a new kind of guitar exploration with live music and video projection. What sets this show apart is that, for the first time, the guitar itself is being used as a