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Best Country Music Albums of 2015



Dar Williams, Danny Schmidt and Angeleena Presley

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By **Martin Chilton**

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The best country music and Americana albums of 2015, chosen by Culture Editor Martin Chilton unless stated. There are 60 choices for the year. Five star reviews are at the top, otherwise numbers refers to the order in which the albums were reviewed and only ★★★★★/★★★★☆/and ★★★☆☆ albums are included.

[The best country music albums of 2016](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/best-country-music-albums-of-2016/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/best-country-music-albums-of-2016/>)

1 ANGALEENA PRESLEY: AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS (SLATE CREEK RECORDS)

Angaleena Presley sings with a good mix of emotion and subtlety (especially on the affecting Better Off Red) on a highly impressive album that is full of powerful and mordant songs and fine musicianship. Presley wrote five of the 12 songs alone and used experienced hands – including Lori McKenna – on the other seven. The songwriting class

shows. ★★★★★ [Read the full review of American Middle Class](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/11357562/Angaleena-Presley-American-Middle-Class-album-review.html)

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/11357562/Angaleena-Presley-American-Middle-Class-album-review.html>)

2 RHIANNON GIDDENS: TOMORROW IS MY TURN (NONESUCH RECORDS)

Rhiannon Giddens shows she can sing country music with great warmth in a version of Patsy Cline's She's Got You and delivers a stunning version of a Dolly Parton song. What I particularly liked about that cover was that she tackles one of the lesser-known songs from Parton – Don't Let It Trouble Your Mind from 1969 – and absolutely nails it. There is also a very non-Dubliners like take on the traditional song O Love is Teasin', which brings out the baleful qualities of the lyrics. The album is produced by T Bone Burnett. ★★★★★ [See full review of Tomorrow is My Turn](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/11411074/Rhiannon-Giddens-Tomorrow-is-My-Turn-album-review.html)

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3 PATTY GRIFFIN: SERVANT OF LOVE (THIRTY TIGERS)

Patty Griffin is a perceptive songwriter and her prowess is shown to the full in Servant of Love's final song, Shine a Different Way, which stands comparison with the finest of Griffin's back catalogue. She plays mandolin on the track, with the excellent David Pulkingham on acoustic guitar and John Deaderick playing accordion, on a composition whose joyous melody allows the beguiling words to soar. The pained ballad You Never Asked Me is about love gone wrong but Griffin deals with social and political

issues, too, on an album deftly produced by American Kid producer and multi-instrumentalist Craig Ross. The songs are given a bold and experimental platform. As well as the country and Americana styles (Rider of Days is so melodic), there are flashes of jazz in the sweet trumpet playing of Ephraim Owens and echoes of north Africa. ★★★★★

Patty Griffin: songwriting for grown-ups (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/artists/patty-griffin-servant-of-love-review/>)

4 JOAN SHELLEY: OVER AND EVEN (NO QUARTER)

Kentucky folk singer and guitarist Joan Shelley has a rich voice that ebbs and flows, and brings out the deftest emotions of her strikingly well-written songs. On Over and Even, which was produced by Daniel Martin Moore, she also sings harmony with Will Oldham and Glen Dettinger and allied to riveting guitar work, as it is on My Only Trouble, the result is terrific. Shelley gets fine support from fingerstyle guitarist Nathan Salsburg on the album. Not Over by Half and Ariadne's Gone are highlights but there is not a weak track here. My favourite song was the beguiling one of flawed love, Jenny Come In, which contains the lines:

"You know what I'd do if I were you?

Set fire to the cords that bind you in longing."

Jenny Come In has a sly and telling dénouement. This is a very fine album. ★★★★★

5 RITA HOSKING: FRANKIE AND THE NO-GO ROAD (RITA HOSKING.COM)

Rita Hosking is an Americana gem. She has a hauntingly powerful voice and uses it to great effect on this her sixth solo album. Frankie and the No-Go Road is a concept album about the "the soul's journey through life"; and the quality of the music from Rich Brotherton (guitar, banjo, mandolin) Glen Fukunaga (upright bass), Dony Wynn (drums, percussion), Sean Feder (dobro, djembe), Kora Feder (harmony vocals) and Andy Lentz (violin) matches the storytelling. Hosking also illustrates the album cover, showing a hero's journey, and there are small guides before the printed lyrics to each of the 12 songs. This music will make you think, it will sadden you and it will uplift you. In a world of Wetiko, it's good to have Hosking calling for a better life. Splendid. ★★★★★

6 CHUCK HAWTHORNE: SILVER LINE (THREE NOTCHES MUSIC)

I confess I'd never heard of Chuck Hawthorne before receiving this debut album but then the Texan had been rather busy: he came into music-making after 21 years as a marine. The album came about after a chance meeting with Juno Award-winning artist Ray Bonneville, who oversees matters with a deft hand. The music is good, the compositions full of depth and originality, especially Welding Son of a Gun, about life after military service. Ovando

is a lovely waltz and Post 2 Gate sad enough to make a Texas cactus weep. A very fine country album. ★★★★★

7 GRETCHEN PETERS: BLACKBIRDS (SCARLET LETTER RECORDS)

Gretchen Peters deals in an original and touching way with the big and interesting subjects of love and death and it's easy to see why she was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall Of Fame last year, because she is a writer of real depth. ★★★★★ [See full review of Blackbirds](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/11429841/Gretchen-Peters-Blackbirds-album-review.html) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/11429841/Gretchen-Peters-Blackbirds-album-review.html>).

8 PHARIS AND JASON ROMERO: A WANDERER I'LL STAY (LULA RECORDS)

Wife and husband team Pharis and Jason Romero run a banjo-making business in rugged British Columbia and there is a peaceful and bucolic feel to their wonderful album A Wanderer I'll Stay. There are vibrant instrumentals – including Backstep Indi about the day their daughter took her first steps – and beguiling original songs such as There's No Companion on an album produced by David Travers-Smith.

The duo bring in some fine guests on A Wanderer I'll Stay, with fiddler Josh Rabie, bassist John Hurd, pedal-steel player Marc Jenkins, and drummer Brent Morton adding to the overall quality of a fine slice of Americana. Listen out for the harmonies on New Lonesome Blues and the way they inject new life into the 1927 blues classic Cocaine Blues. And any fan of jazz star Fats Waller's version of It's a Sin to Tell a Lie, written by Billy Mayhew, should love the clever way the Romeros turn it country. A very fine album. ★★★★★

9 DAR WILLIAMS: EMERALD (BREAD AND BUTTER MUSIC)

Dar Williams is a songwriter of immense talent and her new album, Emerald, is a work of real depth. From the powerful opening song about staying strong in adversity (Something To Get Through) to the mordant Mad River, this is a work of mature and thoughtful songwriting. Richard Thompson on guitar guests on the title song and Suzzy Roche and daughter Lucy Wainwright Roche sing harmonies on a glorious version of Kat Goldman's Weight Of The World. Girl of the World, a song inspired by her visits to an orphanage in Honduras, is another delight on one of the albums of the year. ★★★★★ [Click here for Dar Williams interview](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/11591648/Dar-Williams-interview-the-busy-bee-of-American-music.html) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/11591648/Dar-Williams-interview-the-busy-bee-of-American-music.html>).

10 DANNY SCHMIDT: OWLS (LIVE ONCE RECORDS)

I'm a big fan of the poetic, lyrical songwriting of Danny Schmidt ("And I've always dreamed

of nighttime and always wondered what's the means/That clicks the gears of time each day, and what fills the time between") he sings on the beautiful Cries of Shadows. Owls is a subtle and fresh album and all 11 songs are thought-provoking. The sound is deeper and darker than on the more acoustic Man of Many Moons and the album is produced by David Goodrich (who also plays electric guitars) and featuring Lloyd Maines on lap steel. Schmidt is brilliant and original and way too good for just a cult following. ★★★★★

11 RYAN ADAMS: 1989 (PAXAM)

By making his own version of the whole of Taylor Swift's album 1989, maverick alt country star Ryan Adams has turned a world beating chart smash album into a tender masterpiece of bruised Americana, in the process emphasising the perfect songcraft and exposing the dark heart of emotion beating beneath Swift's gleaming surfaces. ★★★★★ [see Neil McCormick's full review \(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/ryan-adams-1989-review-taylor-swift/\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/ryan-adams-1989-review-taylor-swift/)

12 JASON ISBELL: SOMETHING MORE THAN FREE (SOUTHEASTERN/THIRTY TIGERS RECORDS)

Two things struck me when I opened the album package. One, how much Isbell looks like Vince Vaughn in True Detective; and two, how many words there are in a sheet of Isbell lyrics. Happily, the words are wonderful and Something More Than Free is an album that grows and grows on you. Producer Dave Cobb is in fine action again and gets the best from the settings behind Isbell's effecting voice. Some of the songs are simply splendid - Speed Trap Town, 24 Frames ("You thought God was an architect, now you know/He's something like a pipe bomb ready to blow") and the tender Flagship - but my own favourite was the catchy and beguiling tale Hudson Commodore. All this and lovely fiddle playing from his wife Amanda Shires. ★★★★★

13 CHRIS STAPLETON: TRAVELLER (DECCA)

Chris Stapleton is an experienced songwriter - providing hits for Darius Rucker, Kenny Chesney, Luke Bryan, etc etc - and the 37-year-old shows with his debut solo album Traveller that he is a talented singer in his own right. The former singer for SteelDrivers covers a couple of songs on Traveller, including a moving version of Charlie Daniels's Tennessee Whiskey - but it is the 12 songs he wrote and co-wrote that sparkle. Whiskey and You is a mordant gem and producer Dave Cobb allows all the acoustic emotion to flow on the haunting Daddy Doesn't Pray Anymore, which features the great Mickey Raphael on harmonica. But he can rock it up, too. [A very good album, which won the CMA album of the year in November 2015 \(https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/news/country-music-cma-awards-winners-2015/\)](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/news/country-music-cma-awards-winners-2015/). ★★★★★☆

14 AMELIA CURRAN: THEY PROMISED YOU MERCY (BLUE ROSE RECORDS)

Amelia Curran brings a bigger, rockier and brass-based sound to some of her enjoyable new album *They Promised You Mercy*. The big Hammond organ sound works especially well on first track *Somebody Somewhere*. She has brought together a fine band that includes guitarist Martin Tielli of the Rheostatics, who also painted the portrait for the cover artwork. Lap steel guitarist Christine Bougie (Bahamas), and drummer Joshua Van Tassel *Great Lake Swimmers* also feature. Curran sings well and her compositions are interesting. The album really hits its stride with *Time, Time* (with some neat finger-picking playing), *Strike the Band* and the lovely *You've Changed*. ★★★★★☆

15 BUTCH WALKER: AFRAID OF GHOSTS (LOJINX)

On his seventh album, *Butch Walker*, a sought-after producer himself, brings in Ryan Adams to oversee a very personal and moving album about the emotions stirred by the death of his father. They are beautifully crafted songs, sung with feeling and subtlety and with lyrics full of honesty. Whether it's insights about the constraints of where you live (21+) or about flawed love (*Still Drunk*) or a grief (*Afraid of Ghosts*), the songs here repay listening. And *Father's Day* is a very plaintive song. The musicianship is top notch, with Adams weighing in on drums on two tracks and some neat 12-string playing from Mike Viola. Listen out, too, for Stephen Pratt's subtle work on accordion on *Afraid of Ghosts*. Actor Johnny Depp acquits himself well on a guitar solo on 21+. ★★★★★☆

16 ANNIE KEATING: MAKE BELIEVING (ANNIEKEATING.COM)

Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter Annie Keating is building the reputation her talent deserves and *Make Believing* should really help. It's an accomplished country/Americana album, which was recorded 'live' in the space of a week in New York. There's a cohesion and warmth to 11 songs that flow in and out of each other. Keating's singing is strong and her finger-picking guitar playing sounds better than ever. The supporting band are good, too, with delightful fiddle from James Abrams (especially on the waltzy *Sunny Dirt Road*) and some fine harmonica from Trina Hamlin dotted throughout nine of the tracks. Chris Tarrow adds texture on guitars on an album that was co-produced by Keating and Jason Mercer (the bass player). *Coney Island*, *I Want to Believe*, *Foxes* and *Know How to Fall* are songs that are full of depth and maturity. The short *One Good Morning* ("No bad news breaking/all the way to midnight/too good to be true") is a little earnest but overall this is a highly enjoyable album. And the cover photography, of the *Coney Island Wonder Wheel*, is a striking image. ★★★★★☆

17 STILL THE KING, CELEBRATING THE MUSIC OF BOB WILLS AND THE TEXAS

PLAYBOYS (BISMEAUX RECORDS)

The band Asleep at The Wheel bring together some fantastic talent to pay tribute to Bob Wills, the father of Western swing. The fact that musicians such as 92-year-old saxophonist Billy Briggs, a legend of Texas music, is involved add to the charm of an album clearly made by Wills aficionados. Highlights on Still the King include Lyle Lovett's jazzy version of Trouble in Mind, Robert Earl Keen's deft Ding Dong Daddy From Dumas and the Avett Brothers singing The Girl I Left Behind Me. Amos Lee shows his customary skill on a version of I Hear Ya Talkin' and veterans Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson also play a part. In all there are 22 songs, and none more manic than Old Crow Medicine Show's highspeed version of Tiger Rag. The blend of good singing, fiddle, clarinet, pedal steel makes this respectful album full of fun. ★★★★★

18 THE PUNCH BROTHERS: PHOSPHORESCENT BLUES (NONESUCH RECORDS)

Phosphorescent Blues is produced by the venerable T Bone Burnett. Ten-minute long 'Familiarity' is the opener and introduces the listener to the strings quintet's deft finger-picking and stunning vocal harmonies that are found throughout. At times the music feels more like a classical arrangement than a bluegrass record – but it works, and a more traditional Appalachian sound is found on tracks 'My Oh My' and 'Boll Weevil'. ★★★★★

Review by **Sarah Carson**

19 TOM PAXTON: REDEMPTION ROAD (PAX RECORDS)

Tom Paxton, who has released more than 60 albums in a five-decade career, is rightly celebrated. The man who penned The Last Thing on My Mind (which is featured in the soundtrack to the Coen Brothers film Inside Llewyn Davis) is hailed by John Prine as "the architect of the contemporary folk song". Despite all this, Paxton had to use Kickstarter to get funding for his 2015 album Redemption Road, which features Prine on an engaging duet called Skeeters'll Gitcha. Janis Ian is the other guest star on an amiable 14-song album with some good highlights, including her duet on the title song which has some lovely fiddle from Tim Crouch. The Losing Part is a moving and wry song about ageing, while The Battle of the Sexes is an affably humorous song. Paxton, now 77, wrote all the songs bar the closing The Parting Glass, which is a fitting finale to a sweet album produced by Cathy Fink and Jim Rooney. ★★★★★

20 ALLISON MOORER: DOWN TO BELIEVING (EI RECORDS)

This break-up record, recorded after her seven-year marriage to Steve Earle fell apart, is full of raw emotion. There is a neat cover of Creedence's Have You Ever Seen the Rain but the best songs are her own heartfelt and brooding country ones, especially Down to Believing and Gonna Get it Wrong. Mama Let the Wolf In is a powerful song about her

young son being diagnosed with autism. ★★☆☆☆

21 KIMMIE RHODES: COWGIRL BOUDOIR (SUNBIRD RECORDS)

Kimmie Rhodes was 61 in March 2015 and the Texas star is singing as beautifully as ever on Cowgirl Boudoir. The heartfelt Don't Leave Me Like This (about the death of her long-time partner, Joe Gracey) is moving and the steel guitars, ukuleles and mandolins accompany her voice to subtle and tasteful effect throughout. ★★☆☆☆

22 AWNA TEIXEIRA: WILD ONE (www.hazytales.me)

There's a gorgeous hazy feel to the songs on Awna Teixeira's second full album. Teixeira has been making interesting music since leaving Canadian band Po' Girl and The Wild One shows off her songwriting skills. There's a dreamy quality to her voice – especially on Thunderbird, Freedom Hunter and In The Wintertime – and the backing band (Sly Juhas on drums and percussion, Ja Speed on electric guitar, Brian Kobayakawa on bass, Drew Lindsay on piano, with Oh Susanna adding harmonies) complement her singing well. The highlight is the powerful Blue Heart On Your Sleeve, which deals with her grandmother's life long struggle with mental illness. ★★★★★

23 JUSTIN TOWNES EARLE: ABSENT FATHERS (VAGRANT RECORDS)

Justin Townes Earle, now 33, is still working through his thoughts about his father, the musician Steve Earle. "You won't break my heart again/ You broke it once, I was too young and it didn't mend," he sings on the opening track, Farther From Me. The piercing pedal steel of Paul Niehaus (Calexico, Lambchop) add to a plaintive effect on a moving and heartfelt album that includes groovy tracks such as Day and Night. Life has been a struggle for the son of Steve but the closing track, Looking for a Place to Land, suggests there is some light at the end of the tunnel. ★★★★★

24 RANI ARBO & DAISY MAYHEM: VIOLETS ARE BLUE (SIGNATURE SOUNDS)

Rani Arbo & Daisy Mayhem – Rani Arbo (fiddle, guitar), Andrew Kinsey (bass, banjo, ukulele), Anand Nayak (electric and acoustic guitars) and Scott Kessel (percussion) – have been turning out lovely harmonies and songs for 15 years and Violets are Blue is full of treats. The New England band tackle the subject of love with a bittersweet eye, including on Arbo's own Keep it in Mind. Dirk Powell joins in with some fine accordion on a cover of the gorgeous Danny Schmidt composition Swing Me Down. ★★☆☆☆

25 CAITLIN CANTY: RECKLESS SKYLINE (CAITLINE CANTY)

The second full-length album from Vermont singer-songwriter Caitlin Canty is a delight. It

was recorded live in four days, with talented singer songwriter Jeffrey Foucault acting as the producer. The band is good and features Billy Conway (Morphine) and Eric Heywood (Ray LaMontagne, The Pretenders) and Caitlin's voice is lovely. Get Up and My Love For You Will Not Fade are just two examples of her fine songwriting on an album of 12 really strong songs. ★★★★★

26 GREAT LAKE SWIMMERS: A FOREST OF ARMS (NETTWERK)

Canadian band Great Lake Swimmers excel on I Was a Wayward Pastel Bay, a gentle song which shows off frontman Tony Dekker's country music skills on an album recorded in the unusual place of Ontario's pitch-black Tyendinaga Caves. The Great Bear, dedicated to British Columbia's famed Great Bear rainforest, is lovely. ★★★★★

27 TOM RUSSELL: THE ROSE OF ROSCRAE (PROPER RECORDS)

There are 52 tracks (lasting over 150 minutes) on this bold two-disc country-folk-rock opera about a young 19th-century Irish immigrant drawn to a new life as a cowboy in the west after a failed love affair. The music and talking songs take in gospel, frontier ballads, Tex-Mex and even traditional Irish, and we even get to hear the voice of poet Walt Whitman, on a scratchy recitation of America recorded on wax cylinder. The guests on Tom Russell's 28th album are terrific. Jimmy LeFave, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Gretchen Peters bring real individuality to their songs and it's lovely to hear Finbar Furey sing Carrickfergus. A nod, too, to the beautiful voice that is Maura O'Connell, and it's fitting that the album closes with her version of The Rose of Roscrea. It's a sprawling beast of an album and a remarkable piece of creativity from 68-year-old Russell. ★★★★★

28 JENNY RITTER: RAISED BY WOLVES (FIDDLE HEAD RECORDS)

Slide Mountain, which blends the banjo of Jenny Ritter with fiddle and guitar, is the only instrumental on Raised by Wolves, a strong album of bluegrass-inflected Americana from the musician raised on Vancouver Island. She can write, too, as in the song A History Of Happiness, with the lines: "The only gold I ever need is the sun coming through the trees/the only silver I ever need is the moon making out with the midnight sea". ★★★★★

29 DON GALLARDO: HICKORY (CLUBHOUSE RECORDS)

Don Gallardo hails from Northern California and has lived in Nashville for nearly a decade. His songs have featured on several TV shows, including ABC's Nashville and The Vampire Diaries and you can see why in this solid and melodic country album. There are fine guest stars aplenty joining the How Far West band – drummer Brad Pemberton, Randall Bramblett on saxophone and Willie Nelson sideman Mickey Raphael adding his fine

harmonica tones to Carousel – and a gorgeous slow ballad called When the World Wakes Up. ★★☆☆☆

30 DELLA MAE: DELLA MAE (ROUNDER RECORDS)

The all-female group Della Mae, who formed in Boston six years ago, have followed up This World Oft Can Be with a winning self-titled third album that shows the band has grown in confidence. Lead singer Celia Woodsmith has a strong smoky voice (and writes good songs) and there is a gutsy and vibrant force to the way she and the band (Kimber Ludiker on fiddle, Jenni Lyn Gardner on mandolin, and Courtney Hartman on guitar and banjo) gel. Producer Jacquire King, who worked on Tom Waits's Mule Variations and Norah Jones's The Fall, allows Della's gutsy sound to soar. For the Sake of My Heart and High Away Gone are good originals and there are two stunning covers, of To Ohio and the Rolling Stones's No Expectations. And, for the record, the name Della Mae comes from the Osbourne Brothers song Big Spike Hammer. ★★☆☆☆

31 WILLIE NELSON AND MERLE HAGGARD: DJANGO AND JIMMIE (SONY LEGACY)

Willie Nelson is 82 and Merle Haggard is 78 and although the two old giants of country music can't hit all the notes of youth their phrasing is neat and nuanced on their fourth album together, Django and Jimmie, which tips more than a nod to jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt and country blues pioneer Jimmie Rodgers. The pair cover an early Nelson hit called Family Bible and trade guitars on Somewhere Between. Don't Think Twice, It's Alright gives Bob Dylan's song an airy and upbeat tone. ★★☆☆☆

32 JAMI LYNN: FALL IS A GOOD TIME TO DIE (JAMI LYNN MUSIC)

Great singing, interesting songs and melodies make this one a winner from South Dakota songwriter Jami Lynn. The pick of 10 strong originals is the gorgeous Red Fox, featuring the mandolin of Eddie Farris. The album exudes the landscape, the animals and the people of the American Midwest. There is some lovely dobro from Dalton Coffey, too ★★☆☆☆

33 JIMMY LAFAVE: THE NIGHT TRIBE (MUSIC ROAD RECORDS)

Oklahoma raised, Texas based Jimmy LaFave is an accomplished songwriter, guitarist and singer and it all comes together again on The Night Tribe. His own up-tempo Never Came Back to Memphis is lovely and there is an affecting version of a little known Neil Young song called Journey Through The Past. A strong album. ★★☆☆☆

34 TERESA STORCH: COME CLEAN (MEDICINE SHOW)

Country singer and songwriter Teresa Storch has an interesting background, having a degree in Applied Physics. The title track is lovely and as well as dobro, mandolin and fiddle in bluegrass settings, brass is used well in a couple of soulful and jazzy songs. Guests include James Han (piano, wurlitzer, Rhodes, Hammond B3), Jonathan Byrd (acoustic guitar, harmony vocals) and Bridget Low (violin). She writes well and sings with a depth and conviction, especially on Happy Girl, Sympathy and Before I Go Home. Definitely worth checking out. ★★★★★

35 THE LONE BELLOW: THEN CAME THE MORNING (RED UK)

Aaron Dessner (Mumford & Sons, The National) adds his production nous to a strong album from Brooklyn-based trio The Lone Bellow. The opening title track is bouncy and sweeps you along and the band – Zach Williams, Brian Elmquist and Kanene Pipkin – show they can do maudlin nicely as well, with Marietta. The harmonising on Call to War is excellent and I particularly like the short and sweet To the Woods. An enjoyable album. ★★★★★

36 KACEY MUSGRAVES: PAGEANT MATERIAL (DECCA)

Pageant Material, the 26-year-old Kacey Musgraves's follow-up to her hugely acclaimed 2013 debut Same Trailer Different Park is an excellent, optimistic continuation of the singer-songwriter's unique marriage of old-fashioned honky-tonk melodies with a progressive commentary on life in the small-town South.

Musgraves dishes up warm, witty advice like “Mind your own biscuits and life will be gravy”, preaching messages of acceptance: “In a world of squares, maybe you're just round/You can't be everybody's cup of tea” and makes frequent references to her own inability to sit comfortably among her conservative peers: “I'm always higher than my hair”. Most of Pageant Material was recorded live, and it shows – the musical clarity is perfect and Musgraves's voice has evolved to possess a purer, more controlled quality than we have heard before. In the heartening, catchy Dimestore Cowgirl, she documents her past two years of overwhelming success - which have included a showering of accolades (her debut won her two awards at last year's Grammys) and the music industry's branding her “groundbreaking”. While Musgraves's liberal boldness abounds in her lyrics, the record's most tender tracks Miserable, Fine and Somebody to Love shy away from plunging into the same emotional and poetic depths as the strongest on Same Trailer. ★★★★★ **Review by Sarah Carson**

37 RICKIE LEE JONES: THE OTHER SIDE OF DESIRE (THIRTY TIGERS)

Christmas in New Orleans is one of many fine songs on the first new music Rickie Lee Jones has written in more than a decade. I'm a fan of Jones's songwriting and lines such as "I know about giving up on yourself" shows she has still got it. The Other Side of Desire ranges across pop and jazz as well as country. I especially like Valtz de Mon Pere (Lovers' Oath), a Cajun-bluegrass waltz set to banjo and the Wurlitzer piano of David Torkanowsky. It's a New Orleans album through and through, and Juliette is a powerful song about the destructive powers of nature. The album is produced by John Porter (the Englishman who used to play with Roxy Music) and Mark Howard. Welcome back, Rickie. ★★★★★

38 FIDDLE & BANJO: TUNES FROM THE NORTH, SONGS FROM THE SOUTH (KOS GREEN MUSIC)

There are plenty of instrumentals built just on fiddle and clawhammer duets on the album Tunes From the North, Songs From the South. Of course when Winnipeg's Daniel Koulack, one of the finest clawhammer banjo players around, and fiddler Karrnel Sawitzky, are the two central musicians then you know there is a level of musicianship likely to blossom. It's intriguing to hear how Saskatoon native Sawitzky brings his Ukrainian heritage to his fiddle playing. There are touches of Dobro from Joey Landreth takes full control on vocals on several songs including a fine cover of the old Appalachian folk tune Red Rocking Chair. The standard is high throughout but a particular highlight is the heartfelt version of How Does A Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live. ★★★★★

39 THE HONEYCUTTERS: ME OH MY (ORGANIC RECORDS)

The Honeycutters, who are led by singer and rhythm guitarist Amanda Anne Platt, describe their music as "Appalachian honky tonk" and there is a vibrancy on the third album Me Oh My that makes it a pleasurable listen. Both on enjoyable fast romps (Ain't it the Truth, Carolina) or slower languid ballads (Me Oh My) the band – which features mainstays Tal Taylor (mandolin), Rick Cooper (bass), Josh Milligan (drums) and Matt Smith (pedal steel, electric guitar and dobro) make a cohesive and effective unit behind Platt's warm and rich voice. ★★★★★

40 WATKINS FAMILY HOUR: WATKINS FAMILY HOUR (THIRTY TIGERS)

There's plenty of variety on Watkins Family Hour, with each member of the band getting a turn as lead vocalist. There's the jazzy swing of Prescription for the Blues, the folk of Bob Dylan's Going Going Gone and the country of Robert Earl Keen's Feeling' Good Again. For an example of how fine musicians can come together to create something special, check out the version of Lindsey Buckingham's Steal Your Heart Away, sung by Sara Watkins. She also sings well on the Gordon Lightfoot classic Early Morning Rain. The Watkins Family Hour (with Sean and Sara Watkins, Fiona Apple and Benmont Tench) are a force to be reckoned with. ★★★★★

41 DANIEL ROMANO: IF I'VE ONLY ONE TIME ASKIN' (NEW WEST RECORDS)

Juno-nominated Daniel Romano (from Ontario) has an impressive rich baritone country voice and he brings real feeling to his own compositions such as Let Me Sleep (At the end of a Dream). I liked the pacy Strange Faces (with Caitlin Rose) and the quirky Two Word Joe. ★★☆☆☆

42 TRUE DETECTIVE: MUSIC FROM THE HBO SERIES (HARVEST RECORDS)

Any album produced by T-Bone Burnett comes with a stamp of class and the soundtrack to the interesting HBO series True Detective is no different. There are songs from Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan and Cassandra Wilson but the stand-out tracks and revelation is the music of Lera Lynn. She contributes five songs, including the haunting My Least Favourite Life, and her maudlin voice and stark delivery is beguiling. Lynn will be touring the UK with a new album next year. ★★★★★

43 JERRY LAWSON: JUST A MORTAL MAN (RED BEET RECORDS)

Jerry Lawson, the former lead singer of The Persuasions, has a marvellous voice and Just a Mortal Man is a truly welcome record, because it welcomes back the 71-year-old singer after health problems including a collapsed lung. There are some covers on the album (such as Paul Simon's Peace Like a River) but I particularly liked Never Been to Memphis and In the Dark. The latter is a composition by talented producer Eric Brace, who pulled together the project and oversaw a wonderful Nashville feel behind a great soul voice. Smashing album. ★★★★★

44 ED DUPAS: A GOOD AMERICAN LIFE (MACKINHAW HARVEST MUSIC)

An interesting and rewarding debut album from Texas-born singer songwriter Ed Dupas. The songs pick up on social issues (especially the fine opener A Good American Life) but also the problems of love and loss. His songwriting is strong and his vocal delivery good. Whiskey Bones is one of the highlights but listen out for how well he gels with backing vocalist Tara Cleveland on the maudlin With Love You Never Know. ★★★★★

45 OLD MAN LUEDECKE: DOMESTIC ECCENTRIC (TRUE NORTH RECORDS)

Classy bluegrass in a stripped-down album which includes lots of duets with Luedecke's collaborator Tim O'Brien (on guitar, mandolin, fiddle, bouzouki and supporting vocals). Domestic Eccentric is a sweet and wry look at everyday family life set to great music. Early Days will make any parent well up, along with another highlight called Now We Got A Kitchen. A fine musical conversation between two real talents. ★★★★★

46 THE MIKE + RUTHY BAND: BRIGHT AS YOU CAN (THIRTY TIGERS)

Married singer-songwriters Mike Merenda and Ruthy Ungar are on great form with their new album, starting with the gloriously upbeat opening title track. The Farmer is short and sweet and Freckled Ocean lovely. The band also comprises Jacob Silver (on bass),

Konrad Meissner (drums) and Charlie Rose (pedal steel), with some fine guest musicians including trumpeter Joel Ricci and Aoife O'Donovan on harmonies on Golden Eye. If you want to see why the album's worth exploring then check out the gorgeous Simple & Sober. ★★★★★

47 SAM LEWIS: WAITING ON YOU (BRASH MUSIC)

Sam Lewis has an expressive and soulful voice and it works especially effectively on the track Talk to Me, which features Gabe Dixon on B3 organ. Other guests include The McCrary Singers, Darrell Scott and Will Kimbrough. The songwriting is good (She's a Friend) and it all comes together on the gorgeous Texas, which has the peerless harmonica of Mickey Raphael. ★★★★★

48 AMOS LEE: LIVE AT RED ROCKS (ATO RECORDS)

This wonderful live concert was recorded at the Red Rocks Amphitheatre as Amos Lee goes back over his career, singing with his own band and the Colorado Symphony Orchestra, who are under the direction of conductor Scott O'Neil. Lee is a marvellous singer and here delivers moving and powerful versions of his back catalogue. Violin is only one of the spine-tingling versions from a man truly on song. There is even a version of the Game of Thrones theme thrown in. ★★★★★

49 GLEN HANSARD: DIDN'T HE RAMBLE (ANTI RECORDS)

Glen Hansard has built a reputation as a fine singer-songwriter for 25 years. Hansard was the frontman for influential Irish group The Frames, one half of the acclaimed duo The Swell Season and with Czech songstress Markéta Irglová once took home the Academy Award for Best Original Song for "Falling Slowly" from the Once soundtrack. On Didn't He Ramble, he brings his expressive voice and interesting lyric-writing to traditional-minded Irish ballads such as McCormack's Wall, while Her Mercy uses horns in a stirring soulful way. Paying My Way is a melodic beauty. Class. ★★★★★

Willie Nelson's best 20 songs



View gallery

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[Listen to a stream of Glen Hansard's Didn't He Ramble](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/what-to-listen-to/listen-to-glen-hansards-didnt-he-ramble-exclusive-album-stream/)

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50 AMY HELM: DIDN'T IT RAIN (MEMBRAN)

The 12-song debut album from Amy Helm features some fine cover songs (including Sam Cooke's classic Good News) and soulful originals such as Roll Away. Helm has a lovely voice and calls on some excellent guest musicians, including Little Feat keyboard player Bill Payne, on Didn't It Rain. Amy is the daughter of the late Levon Helm and his brilliant drumming can be heard on three tracks, including a spirited version of Martha Scanlan's Spend Our Last Dime. ★★★☆☆

51 THE WINDING STREAM: THE CARTERS, THE CASHES AND THE COURSE OF COUNTRY MUSIC (OMNIVORE RECORDINGS)

The Winding Stream is the album that accompanies a documentary about the Carter and Cash families. AP Carter, his wife Sara and his sister-in-law Maybelle are three of the most influential musicians in country music history and listening to this lovely CD you can only marvel at what a fantastic songwriter AP Carter was. There are tracks by Johnny and June Carter Cash and George Jones and new versions of songs by John Prine, Rosanne Cash, Sheryl Crow, Kris Kristofferson and others. There is a gorgeous version of Hello Stranger by the Carolina Chocolate Drops. A fine tribute album. ★★★★★☆

52 DANIEL ROMANO: IF I'VE ONLY ONE TIME ASKIN' (NEW WEST RECORDS)

Canadian Juno-nominated country musician Daniel Romano has a graceful and effective baritone voice and is a songwriter of real originality. The themes of his latest album may be the traditional country music territory of heartbreak but Romano brings something freshly mordant to tales of lost love, especially in the wonderful Learning To Do Without Me. We are in harsh emotional territory. In the tale of a flawed marriage, the singer laments of his wife that he gets "more happiness from a bottle and more love from a stranger". There is poignant pedal steel and bold guitar licks throughout backing a singer with a voice that occasionally resembles a young Willie Nelson. Definitely worth checking out. ★★★★★☆

53 THE WAIFS: BEAUTIFUL YOU (COMPASS RECORDS)

It's nearly quarter of a century since three travelling companions in Western Australia started The Waifs and although John Cunningham and sisters Vikki Thorn and Donna Simpson are scattered around the world now, they have lost none of their cohesion on Beautiful You, their first album since 2011's [Temptation](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/8493176/The-Waifs-Temptation-CD-review.html)

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/worldfolkandjazz/8493176/The-Waifs-Temptation-CD-review.html>). The new album leans towards a country-pop sounds but the tunes are melodic, the voices still in fine fettle and the sweet harmonies continue to appeal. Blindly Believing, February and Black Dirt Track are all strong songs, while born-again Christian Cunningham takes the image of a car breaking down to examine human failings in the mournful Dark Highway. ★★★☆☆

54 PETER CASE: HWY 62 (OMNIVORE)

A terrific cover version of Bob Dylan's Long Time Gone is the only song not written by Peter Case on his new album HWY 62. That's good news, because Case is an incisive and deft storyteller; something he shows again on his first album in five years. Prisons are on Case's mind in the thoughtful songs Pelican Bay – about a prisoner in solitary confinement in Pelican Bay State Prison in northern California – and All Dressed Up (For Trial), about an unfairly incarcerated man. The mordant Waiting on a Plane is a real weepie in an album connected by thoughts of location (and dislocation). HWY 62, co-produced with Grammy winner Sheldon Gomberg, is named after the highway that connects Ciudad Juarez with Niagara Falls. “I always saw HWY 62 as my gateway to the country, my doorway to the west,” said Case. The human subjects of his storytelling are interesting and his eye for detail and emotion is as strong as ever. With Ben Harper effective on lead guitar, DJ Bonebrake a powerhouse on drums and Case singing well throughout – especially on Bluebells – this is another fine addition to the catalogue of a modern master. ★★★★★

55 WHITNEY ROSE: HEARTBREAKER OF THE YEAR (CAMERON HOUSE RECORDS)

Canadian Whitney Rose describes her music as "vintage-pop-infused-neo-traditional-country" and there is a real nostalgic feel to her enjoyable debut album. The Last Party is good old-style country while The Devil Borrowed My Boots shows off her songwriting ability. The album is produced by Raul Malo, who lends his lovely vocals to a duet on a stirring version of the Ronettes' Be My Baby. Rose also offers up a delicious cover version of Hank Williams's There's a Tear in My Beer. ★★★☆☆

56 BOB BRADSHAW: WHATEVER YOU WANTED (FLUKE RECORDS)

Bob Bradshaw was raised in Ireland so there is a Celtic tinge to his sweet Americana singing on Whatever You Wanted. Crazy Heart is wonderfully atmospheric, with clever guitar work from Duke Levine. The album features songs co-written with bass player Scoop McGuire. A mention also for the fiddle work of Duncan Wickel and keyboard player

James Rohr, who excels on the fine closing track *The Long Ride Home*. A very solid country record. ★★☆☆☆

57 GORDI TENTREES: LESS IS MORE (BUCKAROO RECORDS)

There's an originality and charm to the songwriting of Ontario-based Gordie Tentrees, as when he says in *Deadbeat Dad* "deal with the egg you laid". *Less is More*, produced by Juno award winner Bob Hamilton, is full of good storytelling from a man who was a former youth worker and a boxer who had 110 amateur fights. Tentrees's voice is light and quirky and works to good effect on the heartbreaking *Tired of Time*. There is also a good cover of Mary Gauthier's *Camelot Hotel*. ★★☆☆☆

58 MADDIE & TAE: START HERE (DOT RECORDS)

There's an amiable mickey-taking quality to the song *Shut Up and Fish*, about a cheesy city man ruining a girlfriend's fishing trip (there's a popular video on YouTube of the song), and the lovely vocals of Maddie Marlow and Tae Dye permeate a smart album. The highlight is the heartfelt acoustic ballad *After the Storm Blows Through*. Guest musicians include the fine fiddle player Stuart Duncan. ★★☆☆☆

59 MARTYN JOSEPH: SANCTUARY (PIPE RECORDS)

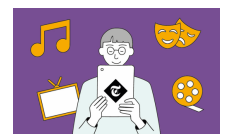
Penarth-born Martyn Joseph's 21st studio album opens with the sweetly melodic *I Searched For You*. *Sanctuary*, which spans country, folk and blues, was recorded in Cardiff and in New Jersey, at the home of producer Ben Wisch (the Grammy-winning producer who masterminded Marc Cohn's hit *Walking In Memphis*). There are songs about Bobby Kennedy, Guatemala and the Middle East (*The Luxury of Despair*) and more personal delights such as *Her Name is Rose*, about his mother. Guest musicians include guitarist Kevin Barry (Mary Chapin Carpenter, Ray LaMontagne), bassist Zev Katz (Jeff Beck, James Brown, Bruce Springsteen) and drummer Ben Whittman (Paul Simon, Laurie Anderson, Rosanne Cash).

60 ANDREW COMBS: ALL THESE DREAMS (THIRTY TIGERS)

Nashville musician Andrew Combs has a sweet, expressive voice that suits soulful tunes such as *Suwannee County*. The album is only around 40 minutes long and is an enjoyable listen, especially the waltz *Slow Road to Jesus*. And there's a healthy quirkiness, too, as with *Bad Habits*, a song about a relationship that has gone sour.

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