

ABOUT MUSIC – By Mariss McTucker

Off in the Woods:

Smoke Signals

Produced by Off in the Woods, recorded and engineered by Robert Lang at Robert Lang Studios, Seattle, WA, 2011

It's always interesting to listen to Montana-inspired music. Songs seem to teem with references to Big Sky Country, being away from it, trying to get back to it, reveling in it. This first effort, from some young Polson men who call themselves Off in the Woods, is no exception.

Fronted by talented vocalist/guitarist Jon Schumaker, the four-piece band plays its way through nine self-penned tunes, all but one by him. Schumaker is joined by Sean Burrell, bass and guitar, Layne McKay, sax and guitar, and Nathan Noble, drums.

The fellows are several years removed from Polson High School, having attended there together. They went their separate ways for awhile, but then came back home and decided to get serious about forming a band.

The songs are lengthy, yet the lyrics are simple expressions, wrapped around Schumaker's dynamic vocal presence. He has a habit of repeating lyric lines and phrases, sometimes just words, and embellishing them with dips and bends and wails, to stunning effect. He sounds a bit like ex-Doobie Brother Michael McDonald, already possessing outstanding control.

Background chatter opens the first piece, the slowly thoughtful "Place to Ponder," with its echo-y effects and bluesy vocal bent. "A Man and His Guitar" has strummy, sustained guitar chords, thick bass and cool drums ("My guitar has no soul of its own, so I give it mine on a short-term loan").

The title song, "Smoke Signals," is syncopated and jazzy, cool and percussive. It recounts the urgency of getting out of the city, being called home by Montana's lure ("Montana fired-up").

Burrell's composition, "Turquoise Trail," is the lone instrumental; it's bluesy, with an almost Latin feel, peppered with great sax and percussion that weave around a simple melody.

"Aspen Grove" is sweetly country, romantic. And the boys channel the seminal spaghetti western on "The Good, the Bad, the Dubly." How fun! It's moody and minor-keyed, reggae-fied, with high vocal wails, chunky sax honks, squirrely electric guitar, muscular bass ... Yowza! I smell a hit.

The group frequently gets into a jam-band frame of mind on their tunes, but the instrumentation is so good and Schumaker's voice so powerful, the music continues to appeal. Besides, dancers like that.

The production is sparse and wonderful. McKay attended engineering and recording school in Arizona and interned for engineer Robert Lang at his Seattle studio, and there, through that connection Off in the Woods got to record this CD. Watch for more good stuff from these guys.

www.Twang: Had It with You

Recorded by Jake Fleming at The Shed Bozeman, MT; produced by Buck Buchanan and Sandy Dodge, Buck Naked Productions, Manhattan, MT, 2011

The new effort by one of Montana's best country bands is out, and it's another danceable winner. Buck Buchanan, Sandy Dodge and the fellows from Bozeman have crafted a 12-song compendium that covers all the country styles, heavy on cool pedal steel and guitar inflections.

Most of the tunes are written and sung by singer and guitarist Buchanan, although a couple of great covers are thrown in.

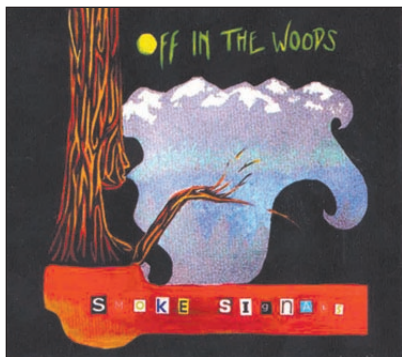
New to the group is guitarist Marcus Engstrom, replacing long-time member Jim Lewis, who left to pursue other musical interests. Whereas Lewis is a Fender Telecaster man, Engstrom, originally from Sweden, plays his own creation – an Engstrom guitar. The album contains numbers featuring each guitar player, adding variety to the CD's sound.

Other members of the band are Russ Olsen, vocals and bass, and Johnny Regan, vocals and drums. Guests Mark Mattix, fiddle, and Carol Buchanan, harmony vocals, help out.

From the twangy, shuffly get-go of the opener, "Pardon Me," your feet are tappin'. Engstrom's silky touch shares instrumental duties with

Dodge's signature pedal steel licks. A great muscular and chunky Telecaster sound from Lewis underpins "Guardian Angel," with its quick, syncopated tempo and country-rock stylings.

"Dear Patsy," written by Buchanan along with Kenny Williams and Kostas, is a love letter to the great Ms. Cline. It's soft and smooth, has shimmering brushwork from drummer Regan, and sports clever lyrics playing off Cline's song titles.



The cover song, "Caught," sung by Olsen, is about every strayer's worst nightmare, where bliss turns to crap in a heartbeat; and Buchanan's "Y'all Keep Texas" is a great jitterbugger, and a lauder, too. It's a kicked-up thumb-of-the-nose at those southerners who think their state is the best ("Drink your Lonestar beer, we'll drink microbrews"). Dodge slays it with his white-hot steel riffs on the Bob Wills-styled tune.

"I Take It on Home" is tender and bluesy with a Willie Nelson nuance; it's a lazy-tongued delivery by Regan from a man who stops for a few drinks on the way home, is tempted, yet remembers who he's got waiting for him. Bill Anderson's "I'll Go Down Swinging" gets a good feeling-sorry rendition, and sparkling drums propel the galloping dancer, "Hands on the Wheel."

The finale is the best pedal steel tune of all time, and one of the coolest instrumentals ever, Santo and Johnny's "Sleepwalk." Trust me when I say Dodge's rendition will give you goosebumps every time. Yowza! I'm sure it's the favorite belt-buckle shiner of www.Twang's crowds wherever they go.

Visit the group at www.twang.org.

Tammie Jones: Angels in Disguise

Recorded, mixed, and mastered by Dan Nichols at Soul Tree Recording, Helena, MT, 2011

Helena songwriter and guitar-player Tammie Jones, member of a zillion bands, just put out a country-folk album she wrote and arranged over the last three years. There's the two-step, a waltz, and some bluesy stuff thrown into the pot.

She's backed by the considerable talents of a gaggle of Helena pickers: producer Dan Nichols, percussion; Derek Hofer, acoustic guitar and mandolin; Doug Melton, electric guitar; Jon Flynn, Dobro; and Mike Killeen, acoustic guitar. Jones also plays electric bass and does all the vocal work, including harmonizing with herself on the self-penned tunes.

The only cover is the last number, a cool rendition of the traditional folk song, "John Riley." Here Jones's arrangement fits well, with its western gallop and straightforward singing and soaring harmonies.

Her notes say her pieces are about "people I've known, contemplation of love, memories, social situations, and family ties and expectations." She's also been singing since she was a tot.

A loping country gait and sweet Dobro propels the title tune, "Angels in Disguise"; Jones's caroling soprano is Parton-esque, by way of one of her influences, Emmylou Harris. She gives gentle advice in "Pebble Song" ("You see yourself a rolling stone; you're only just a pebble").

The tender balladry of "Picture This" is bittersweet. It has nice instrumental work and cool chords. The snappin' gait of the country-rocker, "Heartbreak" has what-for lyrics ("Do you really own a heart ... baby, you can't even find heartbreak").

Jones is not afraid to lay it on the line in her song poems. Her recording offers a good cross-section of the country-folk flavor.

Max Hatt

Produced, recorded, and mixed by Tim Drackert, Glass Hatt Productions, Helena, MT, 2011

If you're feeling the need to seriously chill out, this is the album for you. Tim Drackert, aka Max Hatt, who is better known as the guitarist in the Helena bossa nova/jazz combo Rio, has released a quiet and thoughtful album of instrumental standards and original compositions.

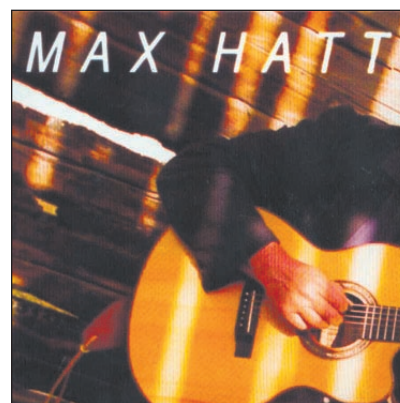
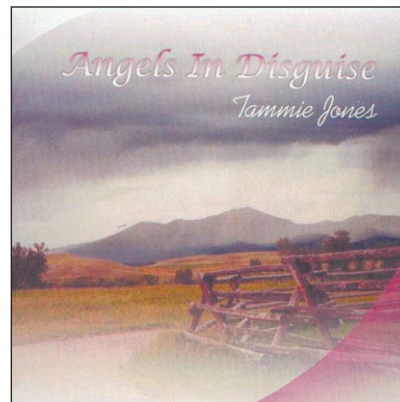
Drackert's liner notes tell us the tunes are inspired by Montana's openness – what he calls "the Big Lonely." The covers are penned by some of the greats in the business – Burt Bacharach and Hal David, Benny Golson, Henry Mancini; you get the drift.

Drackert/Hatt's relaxed style on the first number, Jimmy Webb's "Wichita Lineman," is quietly elaborated. His cleanly enunciated fretwork shows on his own "Aftermath," and his "In a Quiet Place" is slowly jazzy.

The Bobby Scott/Ric Marlow beauty, "Taste of Honey," softly rolls in, builds and mesmerizes. Golson's "I Remember Clifford" gets oodles of relaxed dissonance, whiffs of bossa nova; and in Mancini's "Moon River," Hatt's smooth style wraps around the main theme in a contemplative way. Ditto on the Bacharach/David smash, "Alfie."

There are lots of accomplished maneuvers in these lyrical and melodic works. The sound recording is excellent as well.

Visit www.maxhatteddaglass.com.



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State of the Arts welcomes CDs

State of the Arts welcomes CD submissions by Montana musicians for inclusion in the About Music section. The recordings must be professional, commercially available, full-length CDs, with cover art and liner notes. Brief biographical information on band members would be helpful to the writer.

Please send submissions to either the Montana Arts Council, PO Box 202201, Helena, MT, 59620; or Lively Times, 33651 Eagle Pass Trl., Charlo, MT 59824.