

Rock Music Reviews



Jake Schepps: *An Evening in the Village*. Fine Mighty.

Whatever you want to call the music that people like Edgar Meyer, Chris Thile, Bela Fleck, Mark O'Connor, and Yo-Yo Ma have been recording the past decade, it's taken a hard left into composer Bela Bartok's world. Banjos and Bartok met in 1990 thanks to Bill Crofut, but this time the resulting sound is closer to the *Appalachia Waltz* album. Schepps has rearranged Bartok's settings of Hungarian folk music (and one American tune) for banjo, fiddle, mandolin, guitar, cello, and bass, and turned them into something new and appealing. Straight transcription is blended with improvisation; the solos feel laid back, but the rhythm section keeps a slight tension beneath the surface. My main complaint is that the energy level of "Progressive Acoustic" music has never matched that of its bluegrass roots: the style would be better off leaning more toward Bill Monroe than Mozart. Also, many of the tunes here are on the short side: more improvisation would have been welcome. Still, it's a fascinating, enjoyable album of polished playing. Melancholy isn't passed over, nor is Bartok's particular harmonic zaniness (try "Mikrokosmos #153"); "Stick Game" has a sweet swing to it. Sound is just a bit dry and bass-heavy. **Stephen Estep**

Further Listening: Mike Marshall & Chris Thile: *Into the Cauldron*; Muzsikás: *Bartok Album*



Gillian Welch: *The Harrow & The Harvest*. Acony.

Eight years in the making and definitely worth the wait, this latest roots music collaboration from singer/songwriter Gillian Welch and guitarist David Rawlings uses spare vocal harmonies and simple folk instrumentation (guitar, banjo, and harmonica) to tell powerful stories rendered in lyrical verses heavy with memories and implication. Any one of these ten tunes could have been heard drifting from a front porch in Appalachia a century and a half ago. These dark tales of love, death, abandonment, and separation are timeless yet timely, and Welch's smoky alto adds just the right amount of mountain mist. Rawlings' harmonies lurk just beneath her lead vocals, and the resulting interplay between the two voices is subtle, unadorned, and haunting. There's a stretch of unison in "The Way It Will Be" where it's nearly impossible to tell the two voices apart. Always a pleasure to hear, Rawlings' guitar playing stands out in particular on "Scarlet Town," where it's so precise and rhythmic that it sounds almost like a hammered dulcimer. Sonics are clean, clear, and uncluttered—perfectly suited to this austere music. All told, a fine follow-up to Welch's recent collaboration with The Decemberists. **Sherri Lehman**

Further Listening: Gillian Welch: *Time (The Revelator)*; The Decemberists: *The King Is Dead*



Jennifer Warnes: *The Well*. Impex (two 45rpm LPs).

Jennifer Warnes is one of the most underrated pop singers of her generation. Her albums, though few and far between, brim with melody and craft—and lyrics both intelligent and emotionally weighted. *The Well* was originally released in 2001 but time hasn't dulled its spirit. Along with the title track, standouts include "Patriot's Dream" in duet with Arlo Guthrie, a stunning cover of Tom Waits' "Invitation To the Blues," and Dylan's classic "Born In Time." The songs are lovingly produced, inventively orchestrated, and stocked with a who's who of studio musicians. But Warnes' expressive vocals overshadow all. She's a singer who asks a lot of her gifts, always searching for finer degrees of nuance and dynamics like a painter mixing color on a palette. The reissue from Impex Records (staffed by former Cisco émigrés) is a model for the premium LP industry. Its two-disc 45rpm 180-gram pressings are presented in an individually numbered wood box with a twelve-page, large format booklet that includes notes and lyrics. Bernie Grundman presided over the all-tube remastering. Sonically this about as good as it gets from a studio-bred multi-track—fabulous acoustic textures, deep bass, and awesome ambience. A vinyl-lover's dream come true. **Neil Gader**

Further Listening: Mary Chapin-Carpenter: *Come on, Come On*; Linda Ronstadt: *Heart Like A Wheel*