

Rock Music Reviews



Rhonda Vincent: *Destination Life*.
Rounder 0623.

Where to begin enumerating the many virtues of Rhonda Vincent's anxiously awaited new album? The songwriting is strictly top shelf, and shows Vincent herself growing as a writer, too, especially on the album-opening lover's lament, "Last Time Loving You"—a winsome reflection curiously done at a barnburning pace, which provides a splendid introductory exhibit of transcendent banjo playing by Aaron McDaris, late of the Grascals, new to Vincent's Rage quartet. Vincent's singing is arguably better than ever, especially in the Alison Krauss-like vulnerability she summons in the backwoods country strains of Pete Goble's loping tearjerker, "I Can Make Him Whisper I Love You." (Again, McDaris's banjo playing, restrained and evocative, is a marvel.)

With McDaris on board, the Rage has raised its own high standard, fashioning stimulating to-and-fro dialogues on the fast-paced tunes, offering tight ensemble work and keening vocal harmonies on the aching ballads. Vincent goes for the vivid sound she favors on stage, with warm voices and close-miked instruments sharing equal ground in the soundscape, but all well defined and engaged in a spirited conversation throughout the dozen cuts. As both a musical and a human experience, *Destination Life* is nothing short of enthralling. **DM**

Further Listening: Valerie Smith & Becky Buller: *Here's A Little Song*; New Coon Creek Girls: *Our Point of View*



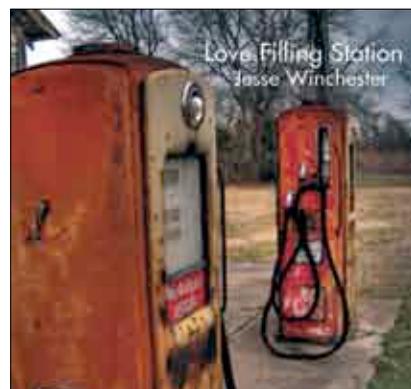
Jennifer Warnes: *The Hunter*.
Cisco 7063 (LP).

Sometimes artists are typecast by their own success. For songbird Jennifer Warnes, that success arrived as a pair of mid-1980's duets—the mega-hits "Up Where We Belong" with Joe Cocker and "(I've Had) The Time of My Life" with Bill Medley. Whether it was that association or Warnes' famous independent streak, she never attained more than an insider's popularity while other, lesser singers prospered.

The Hunter was Warnes' neglected follow-up to her acclaimed 1986 release *Famous Blue Raincoat*. A superbly balanced collection of urban tales of love, loss, and longing, songs like "Way Down Deep," Donald Fagin's "Big Noise, New York" (he sings backup), and the sexy, predatory vibe of the title track still click, aptly abetted by such crack studio musicians as drummer Vinnie Colaiuta, percussionists Lenny Castro and Roscoe Beck, and bassist Jorge Calderon.

Remastered by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman Mastering, the sonics are luscious. Warnes has always had an audiophile's ear and was hands-on with this effort—one of the last from now-defunct Cisco Records. It soars effortlessly, restoring warmth and delicacy, and easily besting the earth-bound but otherwise excellent CD. It's an example of both an artist in full charge of her powers, and analog at its very best. **Neil Gader**

Further Listening: Linda Ronstadt: *Simple Dreams*; Joni Mitchell: *Court and Spark*



Jesse Winchester: *Love Filling Station*.
Applesseed 1116.

Singer-songwriter Jesse Winchester has mellowed since the early 70s when the Robbie Robertson protégé emerged with a mix of Southern-rock vitality and country gentleman charm. His first studio album in nine years finds Winchester maturing as a songwriter and performer, delivering some of his best stuff to date—not bad for a fellow whose work has been covered by everyone from Joan Baez to Elvis Costello to Jimmy Buffet.

On this very nicely recorded disc he's backed by an ace country band that includes such seasoned players as lap-steel guitarist Jerry Douglas and acoustic guitarist Russ Barenberg as well as newcomers Guthrie Trapp (mandolin) and Andy Leftwich (fiddle). Winchester's duet with the young vocalist Claire Lynch, on the splendid cover of Ann Lucas' whimsical "Loose Talk," is about as good as country gets. It's one of three covers, but this filling station also offers nine new originals from the man Bob Dylan called one of the finest songwriters of his generation. Musically, the originals range from pop ("O What a Thrill") to country-rock ("Wear Me Out") to Western swing ("It's a Shame About Him") to sweet-but-wry sentiment ("Bless Your Foolish Heart"), all of them custom-made for Winchester's easy-going front-porch style and endearing tenor crooning. **Greg Cahill**

Further Listening: Jesse Winchester: *Live from Mountain Stage*; Jesse Winchester; Levon Helm: *Electric Dirt*