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Reviews

self-negation" set in the expanses of nature. The lack of any edification or lesson or comfort from death is the root note of many of these songs. The slow eradication of a specific memory of a deceased loved one turns into another slow-blooming emptiness. Conceptually, this album is as heavy and dark as the blackest metal, only it's so quiet as to almost be silent. *John Adamian*

Kelley Ryan

Telescope MANATEE



On her third album, **Kelley Ryan** finds herself in fine company. **Marshall Crenshaw** and **Kimm Rogers** served as

writing partners, while **Don Dixon** and **Marti Jones** settled into the studio for backup support. Even so, Ryan maintains a decidedly low-key setting, never allowing her guests to overwhelm her fragile melodies and unassuming singing style. Credit Jones with adding subtle backing harmonies that fail to usurp Ryan's role at center stage, and Dixon for providing string arrangements that don't distract from the overall ambience. That's fortunate, given that the songs maintain a dim haze, with "Save Me," "Flake White Heart," "Pulling for Romeo" and "The Broken News" managing a shimmering effect throughout. There's no denying that it's a lovely set of songs, even if Ryan's resonance is somewhat reserved. Indeed, it's only when there's a counterpoint to the melody (in the rare case of "Secret Life") or an effective attempt to emulate a catchy chorus (as found in "Real Gone Girl") that there's any proviso for a ready refrain. As a result, *Telescope* requires the listener to zoom in for full effect, especially when it comes to picking up on the niceties and nuances. At that point, its seductive charms take flight as the music flows effortlessly from track to track. Not surprisingly, Ryan finds common ground with Carole King, Carly Simon, Melissa Manchester and other easy listening icons, but she still manages to make a warm impression all on her own. *Lee Zimmerman*

Reverend Peyton's Big Damn Band

Front Porch Sessions FAMILY OWNED RECORDS/THIRTY TIGERS



This blues/rock combo only has three members—percussionist and vocalist **Max Senteney**, washboard player and vocalist **Breezy Peyton**, and the **Reverend Peyton** himself on guitar and vocals—but they produce a massive sound. The music here is stripped down to its essence, with most tracks centering on the Reverend's bristling guitar work and larger-than-life vocals. The bright fingerpicking on "One More Thing" contrasts nicely with a list of the everyday disasters that threaten a hardworking family. Peyton sings it with a winning



El Michels Affair

combination of anger and ironic humor. He also wails out the cryptic message of "What You Did to the Boy Ain't Right," punctuating his angry howl with stinging slide-guitar asides, and adds a ragtime lilt to his playing on "When You Lose Your Money," a variation on "Stack O'Lee," delivered with a smoldering vocal that intensifies the violent lyric. Breezy joins in on "We Deserve a Happy Ending," providing harmonies and hand claps to accent the song's stomping, funky energy, while Peyton's throbbing bass notes give "Shakey Shirley" a down-home dance pulse as it celebrates the joys of true love and root beer. Over four-million viewers have visited YouTube to watch Peyton play shotgun guitar—a three-string guitar/shotgun hybrid that fires live ammo between arpeggios—but the music here doesn't rely on gimmicks to make its impact. With minimal production adding a natural verb to the tracks, Peyton's husky howl, stark playing and simple lyrics give the album a bracing, ageless power. *J. Poet*

Karen Elson

Double Roses H.O.T RECORDS LTD.



It's hard to listen to **Karen Elson's** new solo album without trying to infer something from the lyrics. Elson's last record, 2010's *The Ghost Who Walks*, was produced by her then-husband Jack White and, since then, the two have had some fairly public discord. "Call Your Name," one of the standout tracks on *Double Roses*, is a breakup song, one that describes the lingering heartbreak of a relationship that's split apart. It could be about White, which is the first thing that occurs to the listener, and that sense is compounded by the fact that the track was co-produced by The Black Keys' **Patrick Carney**, who has his own beef with Elson's ex. Celebrity drama aside, though, it's a lovely song and it would likely ease the ache of anyone going through a breakup. It's one of Elson's best efforts on

this album, which is whimsical and airy, especially on flute-laced opener "Wonder Blind." There is a real emotional heft behind the songs (although occasionally that weight is ignored in favor of precious, chirping instrumentals), and Elson explores what feels like years of feelings. There's a sincerity to her expression as she allows us to be privy to her inner thoughts and reflections. Folksy crooner "A Million Stars" is, again, about a past relationship ("Now I'm haunted by a memory/ And between us lays a raging sea") and acoustic closer "Distant Shore" is particularly soulful and evocative as Elson howls, "I am alone and I am free." *Emily Zemler*

El Michels Affair

Return to the 37th Chamber

BIG CROWN



There's some serious reverse-engineering happening on this ominous, funky and cinematic record. The tracks are essentially (mostly) instrumental re-creations of songs from the Wu-Tang Clan's catalog, as well as from some of the Wu members' solo projects. **El Michels Affair** mastermind **Leon Michels** worked on analog tape with impeccably recorded beats, guitar tones and keyboard flourishes. The group consists of members of The Dap-Kings, Antibalas and other New York instrumental/studio wizards. They were hired to back Wu-Tang, which launched them in this direction. This album, a follow-up to EMA's first fully Wu-centric project in 2009, opens with a cover of "4th Chamber," a sample-rich song from GZA's second solo record. "Snakes" is a cover of an Ol' Dirty Bastard track that was fueled by a speed-adjusted Joe Tex sample, and which has the source material moved to the foreground here, courtesy of soul singer **Lee Fields**, while still retaining a dub vibe. The whole album is a fascinating homage piece to the Wu-Tang Clan and to their deep library of

samples and beat-making mastery. It happens to be completely captivating and retro-psychedelic, even if one is not familiar with the Wu record that it's riffing on. The album returns music based, in part, on mechanical reproduction to the realm of the handmade. Listen to the way that the sampled vocal scraps or accents from the turntable are turned into textural touches from the guitar or the organ. It's a back-and-forth that seems true to the genre, and it's done with such mastery that it becomes its own thing. *John Adamian*

Steve Hackett

The Night Siren INSIDEOUT



As an early member of Genesis, guitarist **Steve Hackett** was instrumental in crafting many of the band's best

albums—*Nursery Cryme*, *Foxtrot* and *Selling England by the Pound* among them—long before Phil Collins' promotion to frontman eradicated their progressive posture and made them more like pop wannabes. It's little wonder then that Hackett has spent the latter part of his career retracing Genesis' signature songs live and on record, recreating former glories for the adoring masses. Notably then, *The Night Siren* finds him moving forward under his own aegis. There's all the sweep, drama and grandeur that one might expect from an artist of his ilk—as evidenced on songs such as "Behind the Smoke," "In the Skeleton Gallery," "Fifty Miles From the North Pole" and "El Niño"—but, to his credit, Hackett integrates other intriguing additives as well. Oversized arrangements, raging percussion, uilleann pipes, and all manner of South American and Middle Eastern instrumentation provide the exotic elements that enhance the album's cinematic sound. Those international additives impart a message about global unity and understanding—an intent that's especially obvious on "West to East" and "Anything but Love"—but, for the most part, the music sacrifices intimacy for intensity. Hackett's soaring fretwork takes center stage, with occasional harmonies, folk-like flourishes and a sound that recalls Mike Oldfield's symphonic stance enhancing the sense of spectacle. *The Night Siren* finds Hackett back making music through his own dynamic designs. *Lee Zimmerman*

British Sea Power

Let the Dancers Inherit the Party

GOLDEN CHARIOT/CAROLINE INTERNATIONAL



British Sea Power haven't unveiled a proper album since 2013, when they dropped *Machineries of Joy*. Between then and now, the U.K. group created several film soundtracks but largely stayed