

John Hiatt

The Open Road

(NEW WEST)

Great John Hiatt albums are simply the norm, and at least three of them would be considered classic by any measure. Unfortunately, it's likely that anything new Hiatt releases will be judged against *Bring the Family*, *Slow Turning*, *Riding with the King* or *Crossing muddy Waters*. Those in the know (or, as Hiatt used to call his web site, "in the John") should find much to enjoy here, which is to say *The Open Road* is a pretty damn good ride. Newcomers will certainly celebrate the fine craftsmanship, diversity and the uncommon originality of Hiatt's organic roots music.

"The Open Road" takes off with guitar sounding like a siren's din, an insistent rocker that chases hope. "Like a Freight Train" will hit hard with folks gettin' up there—the slow, sly blues chock-full of Hiatt's one-of-a-kind metaphors, but otherwise as serious as a heart attack (pun intended). "My Baby" struts tough, the greasy slide ramping up a blues-from-the-underside groove. Later, the amazing hook in the hip-shakin' "What Kind of Man" will hold any kind of man or woman steady and tight. With "Carry You Back Home," Hiatt offers a performance of signature-superb bleeding country-soul, his voice rising and falling with the ebb and flow of emotion, and the rolling melody. To borrow from the title of his last album, John Hiatt seems to be a different old man, his caustic wit tempered a tad, but a man still capable of greatness, and therefore one to keep an eye—and an ear—on.



—TOM CLARKE

The Electric Rag Band

If You Got Some

(ERB)

The Electric Rag Band's fourth record is one of their most eclectic records to hit. Self-touted as "roots music that rocks," the band juggles blues, Americana, country, ragtime and rockabilly, with a sound and song selections

that bring something different to the table each time.

Lead vocalist Pat Cook plays the guitar and the banjo; Sara Bowersock and Karen Naifeh Harmon work bottle clanks and the fiddle, respectively. Harmonicas, jaw harps and more are essential to the band's overall shtick. In "Goin' Down," Cook plucks his banjo, while Bowersock carries the guitar rhythm—one of the most solid tracks. "Oh Yeah!," a mostly instrumental jam, picks up the speed with a feisty bass line and a solo from each band member. As a whole, *If You Got Some* is well paced and the musicians nicely complement each other.

There's definitely a market for the Electric Rag Band, but their sound may be too esoteric for the mainstream, or hell, even an alt-country indie crowd. But damn! It does make you want to visit Oklahoma, strap on some boots and party.

—NICK CARUSO

John Ellis & Double-Wide

Puppet Mischief

(OBLIQSOUND)

The spirit of New Orleans is all over "Okra & Tomatoes," the lead track on *Puppet Mischief*, saxman John Ellis' self-produced second album with Double-Wide (sixth overall). That full-blown, in-your-face French Quarter joy persists on track after track as this far-reaching quartet—Brian Coogan (organ), Matt Perrine (sousaphone), Jason Marsalis (drums) and Ellis (tenor saxophone and bass clarinet)—is augmented by the bluesy harmonica of Gregoire Maret and Alan Ferber's trombone. And you just know when that badass trombone stunningly syncopates with sax 'n' sousa, it's positively orgasmic.

Ellis composed all nine tracks, meandering bravely into the kind of baroque pastiche that perfectly counters the Bacchanalian orgy aspects. "Fauxfessor" has that slightly off-kilter



feel that keeps up a taut type of tension. Many tracks go through



plot twists dramatic enough in their intensity to turn heads. "Dubinland Carnival" has a few moments of kinetic sax/trombone interplay that steal the show.

"Chorale" is the most gorgeous moment. Written for a string quartet, it's the sound of four horns blowing free, the opposite of "Héroes De Acción," which, in all its wild abandon, is almost played for laughs. It's all very heady and quite intoxicating!

—MIKE GREENBLATT

Marley's Ghost

Ghost Town

(SAGE ARTS)

The bittersweet, atmospheric soundtrack for the wayfaring stranger's journey, *Ghost Town* sees this veteran California band embracing deep country roots while sweetening the pot with a dash of folk, gospel and even bluegrass. The album is an audio illustration of wide-open prairies, craggy southwestern trails and campfires under starry skies.

The band's ninth studio release features the handprint of producer Cowboy Jack Clement, who is an absolute wizard when it comes to capturing the "western" that has long since been dropped from the once proud label "country and western" music. Clement helps Marley's Ghost awaken a Marty-Robbins-meets-Waylon-Jennings-by-way-of-Bakersfield spirit that makes for an Americana masterpiece.

Standouts include a tender, gorgeous take on Warren Zevon's "She's Too Good For Me" and the blue-sky warmth of the wandering tale "Travelin' Teardrop Blues," featuring an open E chord more expansive than the Great Plains themselves. Also noteworthy is the accordion-laced, Tex-Mex vibe of "My Love Will Not Change." As musical artisans, the band incorporates mandolins, pedal steel, keys and violin into personal song structures.

Ghost Town is, in essence, a timeout from the clutter of the commercial musical universe, to stop and smell the proverbial musical roses—sweet as a desert rain.

—MARK URICHECK

