

ARTISTS you should know about by Mick Skidmore

1. BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT RAISING HELL?

"This is our life and we mean for our music to speak our passion," says guitarist John Kasiewicz of the trio Raisinhill. Formed little more than a year ago, the band has already released an eponymous debut album that stands up well in the realms of jazz-rock or jazz-based jambands but also shows a passion for melody and structure and conversely atonal experimentation. Raisinhill's lineup of guitar, bass and drums is in many ways minimalist but they garner the most they can from it. Rock and jazz rhythms collide, while Kasiewicz's guitar work has an eccentric flair—his solos and phrases often take off in unexpected directions, making for an exciting and challenging listening. On their album (recorded live in the studio in just two days), the muscular riffs of "V.S.S." and the flowing, melodic leads of "Wendy" show two sides of their sound. The longer pieces are often sewn together with experimental segues that point to the band's future. While a little more experimentation could take these guys to the next level, the superb grooves of the rhythmic "Maker's March" hint that this is a band on the verge of bigger things. I can't remember when I enjoyed an instrumental album from an "unknown" band this much on first hearing.

WWW.RAISINHILL.COM

2. DAVIDSON, NORTH CAROLINA IRON GRASS

The quartet Cast Iron Filter has a roots sound that skips across genres in an electrifying amalgam of Americana sounds. The band has a busy touring schedule: For five years now they have been touting their organic, home-grown music in better than 20 states. The latest album, their fourth, *Live From the Highway*, is a live set recorded last August at Rafter's, St. Simon Island, Georgia. This unpretentious and high-octane set shows CIF's adeptness at fusing different musical elements. Mandolin and banjo play a prominent role but they serve the songs up with a snarling rock backbeat and occasional jazz meanderings. While bluegrass is certainly a key element, country, rock and jazz elements are also expertly intertwined into their original songs. Fans of newgrass and jamgrass should find plenty of interest in what the band affectionately terms "Iron Grass." Cast Iron Filter has a sound that should sit comfortably with String Cheese fans as well as fans of more classic progressive bluegrass à la Old and In the Way or the Rowan Brothers or, for that matter, more classic Southern rock and country acts.

WWW.CASTIRONFILTER.COM

3. SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

DEADICATED IN CALIFORNIA

Berkley Hart is a Southern California band that updates the classic singer/songwriter mode but occasionally adds a little more musical muscle. The band is fronted by singer/songwriters/guitarists Calman Hart and Jeff Berkley. Both have a penchant for "authentic American music" as played by The Band, American Beauty era Grateful Dead, Little Feat and Bob Dylan. In fact, one could almost imagine they are singing about themselves (aside from the age) on "Old Grey Deadhead" from their latest album, *Something to Fall Back On*. The band infuses its rich, harmony-laden songs with strains of bluegrass, folk, country and rock. The end result could be construed as retro, but another view is that their solid and finely-crafted songs are a good melding of yesterday and today. Their poignant cover of The Band's "Up On Cripple Creek" is good evidence, while the original "Woody Guthrie Knew" shows the strength of their songs.

WWW.BERKLEYHART.COM

4. CLEVELAND, OHIO MIX WELL AND BLEND

Rare Blend is an instrumental outfit that originally began life as a duo back in 1993. Since then, it has grown to a quartet and released three albums. The band's philosophy is a simple one: it explores instrumental music that skirts the borders of jazz, fusion and rock with a little bit of world beat thrown in. Rare Blend's latest album, *Evolution Theory*, is a solid, impressive effort that highlights its diversity and musical precision. Meandering bass, funky riffs and searing guitar work underscore the opening cut "Little Mean Baby," while the band settles into more typical fusion-like flair, aptly titled "Lost 7/8." Rare Blend has dynamics and power more in keeping with '70s progressive rock than the average jazz-based jamband, but this album shows that they settle comfortably and imaginatively into a variety of musical spheres.

WWW.RAREBLEND.NET

5. ITHACA, NEW YORK MUSICAL FUSION

Ithaca is now home to the eccentric but promising quartet Nucleus which, since its relocation from Arcata, California, has played various Eastern seaboard states and has released a fine, diverse album, *Live From the Center*. With a name like Nucleus you might expect the band to have a defined sound and overt structure, and in a strange way they do—it encompasses just about everything. Rock and jazz are the backbone but their exploratory instrumental excursions and quirky songs cross over into many musical spheres, seemingly at will. Saxophone plays a prominent



role in the improvisations, as do intricate rhythmic changes. Vocally, Nucleus is better than your average jamband. The six-song *Live From the Center* offers much promise from these accomplished players. Certainly a group to check out if you are into Phish, moe. or Umphrey's McGee.

WWW.NUCLEUSMUSIC.COM

6. CHICAGO, ILLINOIS SMELLS LIKE FOLK... AGAIN!

Though I mentioned them in this column a couple of years ago, Patchouli embodies all that is good about modern-day folk music and so deserve a second go-around. The duo consists of vocalist/multi-instrumentalist Julie Patchouli and guitarist/keyboardist Bruce Hecksel. The two have played together for a decade (some of that time as members of folk/rockers Aunt Betsy) and have released six albums. Each disc shows them honing their skills more. The latest effort, *Come a Little Closer*, is their most consistent and immediately impressive to date. Patchouli uses a full band with bass, drums, flute and saxophone—giving their richly melodic songs an added dimension—and subtle world beat instrumental textures underscore the songs. Patchouli has a great voice, almost like a sweeter Joni Mitchell, and the duo's music positively exudes good vibes.

WWW.PATCHOULI.NET

7. ATHENS, GEORGIA SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

Tishamingo is a no-nonsense quartet that mines the vast wealth of Southern rock and roots music. The band has been touring extensively in the South as well as Colorado and late last year released an impressive, self-titled debut of original songs. The album was produced by John Keane (Widespread Panic, R.E.M.), who also adds steel guitar and banjo on a couple of cuts. Tishamingo's rugged sound is closer to Gov't Mule and Widespread Panic than, say, Lynyrd Skynyrd or the Allman Brothers. The dozen cuts on *Tishamingo* range from the impressive slide-driven rock of "Whiskey State of Mind" to the swaggering funky riffs of "Lickety Split" and the lively country swing of "Little Red." Tishamingo may not break any new musical ground but their music is solid and the songs as good as those of their aforementioned influences.

WWW.TISHAMINGO.COM

8. BURLINGTON, VERMONT ALL GROWN UP

Patrick Fitzsimmons used to be the drummer for From Good Homes. These days he marches to a different beat, although the shadow of his former band lives on in his delicate, poetic songs. In FGH's later days, Fitzsimmons began writing and singing songs but didn't get much of a chance to air them because, as he says, "I was in a band that had a great songwriter, Todd Sheaffer, and I thought I was playing an important part in bringing those wonderful songs to fruition." Fitzsimmons recalls that going solo was "very frightening," as he became the focal point and had a whole new set of responsibilities, such as connecting with the audience. Since the band's demise he has developed into an articulate singer/songwriter who now totes an acoustic guitar and has released two solo albums (*The Changing* in 2001 and more recently, *Dance*). Not only is *Dance* a remarkable album of beautiful and thought-provoking songs, it's also a testament to the belief his fans have in him: the disc's recording was funded by fans who pre-ordered it (Fitzsimmons lists all their names in the sleeve as a thank you). When Fitzsimmons had the idea he was skeptical but finally went with it. "The response was terrific... checking my email the day after sending out the 'commissioned' CD letter was a very happy one for me. Artistically, this was

runover:

a real turning point. It made me feel very good about what I was doing.” It may seem drastic switching from drums to guitar and then becoming an articulate songwriter but Fitzsimmons says it was always there. “I first got into music by listening to singer/songwriters of the ‘70s like Cat Stevens, James Taylor, [Dan] Fogelberg, Paul Simon, Neil Young... so for me this is coming full circle.” Several former band members guest on Dance but it’s Fitzsimmons’ heartfelt and often rhythmic songs that are its focal point. His delicate vocals make him one of the most captivating, if understated, songwriters around today. If you enjoy FGH, or classic singer-songwriters of the ‘70s, this album is a must.