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Jeff Talmadge

Secret Anniversaries

"The music is ironic -- but always kind and always rich..."
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"Jeff Talmadge has both the craft and the passion necessary to make memorable music that touches the heart..."
-- Paul Edward Sanchez, singer/songwriter

"Intelligent and graceful songs, gloriously performed..."
-- Jean Synodinos, 1996 Kerrville New Polk Winner

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and modern big-band blues; and her take on LeRoi Brother Steve Doerr's "Wishing Well" is as sweet and heartfelt a song prayer as anything in contemporary folk. Yet in the end, it all sounds like Toni Price.

That's because Price is one of the best friends a good song can find. Whether it's a seductive whisper or a tough-minded growl, she conveys essential emotions without a trace of artifice, singing every word as if she fully knows of what the song speaks. It's not something she announces or proclaims, as is so common in the blues tradition, but rather delivers with a conversational intimacy and directness. Although her music has often been compared to Raitt's pre-pop output, one never gets the sense Price is emulating any blues masters, but rather that she's applying what she's absorbed to her own devices.

So for all the variation here in styles and backing, from full-on band to small acoustic guitar combo, she makes every track her own — even though she doesn't write herself, drawing as usual on her primary song source Gwil Owen, along with David Ball, Walter Hyatt, Dr. John (who guests on his "Remember Me?") and the late Charles Brown. It's the mark of a genuine artist, and when it comes to singing with heart and knowing empathy, Price is a modern master of the many shades of blue.

— ROB PATTERSON

GOURDS

Ghosts Of Hallelujah
Munich

Gourds songwriters Jimmy Smith and Kevin Russell tend to write songs from different planets lyrically, but musically they live in the same zip code. While Smith's songs favor chuckling at the mundane, annoying, or even repulsive, Russell writes with a more reverent touch. In the end, though, there's a wistful pining that haunts both writers, and therein lies the congruity and the charm.

Their fourth release (counting last fall's mostly live EP

gogitchyershinebox) finds the three original members — Smith on bass, Russell on mandolin and Claude Bernard on accordion — joined by two new ones. Drummer Keith Langford comes by way of the Damnations TX; former Uncle Tupelo/Wilco/Freakwater multi-instrumentalist Max Johnston adds fiddle, dobro, banjo and more mandolin. The new members enrich the band, and this recording shines even brighter than their formidable 1998 disc, *Stadium Blitzer*.

The title track opens with Johnston's spirited fiddle carrying Russell's up-tempo Southern anthem. It's followed by "Gangsta Lean", a laid-back bluegrass groove flowing behind Russell's assessment of the gangsta rap scene. "It's not a mystery when you know the history/Of East Coast and West Coast killas/And you can't tell me it doesn't bother you," he calmly reproaches.

Meanwhile, Smith's abasement, a more self-inflicted affair, climaxes with a trilogy of songs that run uninterrupted near the middle of the album. The best is the last, "Son Of Bum", a cheery little number about cockroaches that's backed with carnivalesque accordion and triangle chimes. "It ain't no failing I just want 'em out/I live in filth and now I want 'em out," he sings, and you can hear his eyes roll in desperation.

But just when you think Smith is a perpetual class clown, he delivers one of the disc's most poignant tunes. "Rugged Roses" is a sweet-but-real song about commitment he wrote for Russell and his wife's wedding. Russell volleys back with "(the new way of) Grievin' & Smokin'", a jammin' tune about his long-term commitment to partying 'til 3 a.m. with the boys in the band. How's that for role reversal? — DEBORAH MALAREK (www.allegro-music.com)

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