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Jeff Talmadge

Secret Anniversaries

"The music is ironic -- but always kind and always rich..."
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"Intelligent and graceful songs, gloriously performed..."
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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 Damations 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 kills/And you can’t tell me it doesn’t bother you,” he calmly reproaches.

Meanwhile, Smith’s abseament, 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 newwayof) 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

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 year’s mostly live EP JUNE CARTER CASH

Press On

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