



the gourds ghosts of hallelujah

THE GOURDS

TITLE...
Ghosts of Hallelujah

LABEL...
Munich



THE BOTTLE ROCKETS

TITLE...
Brand New Year

LABEL...
Doolittle



Tastemakers typically knock alt-country bands by employing the inverse of logic they use to slag plain ol' alternative rock groups. The Americana bands, so the theory goes, are too "reverent," while the rootless suburbans of the alternative nation don't know their own history. Most contemporary roots-rock actually falls somewhere in the middle, the music thriving on its own contradictions. Does that guy in the band Blue Mountain really drive around town "drinking from a jar?" You might as well ask if Kid Rock actually has a lot of his boys locked up in "County." In either case, the correct answer is "Who knows, and who really cares?"

You'd be hard-pressed to find a better symbol of the displaced state of American music than the fact that the Gourds, an Austin, Texas, quartet, currently make records for a Dutch label perhaps best known for reggae reissues. As befitting their hometown, the Gourds blend collegiate smart-assness with workaday smarts, throwing dobros, mandolins, fiddles, and banjos into twangish songs that are almost always tightly constructed and finely observed. One of the

most winning moments on *Ghosts of Hallelujah* is "Gangsta Lean," a yearning bit of introspection that elliptically uses East Coast/West Coast posse feuds as its subject matter. Far from a joke band, the Gourds are simply unafraid to tackle Americana in all its forms.

As with the Gourds, it's easy to mistake the Bottle Rockets for a musical goof. Hailing from a Missouri town called Festus (really!), they sound like a bar band eternally playing one song after last call. *Brand New Year*, a set of odds and ends from the past few years of their shoulda-been-contenders career, occasionally missteps. Reworking "Smoke on the Water" as "The Bar's on Fire" was probably unnecessary, and the antitechnology "Helpless" doesn't exactly ring true from a band that once wrote a tribute to fuzz-busting radar guns. But the two versions of the title song are opposite sides of the same finely wrought New Years Eve brooding, and "Gotta Get Up" smoothly details the endless cycle of work and sleep that is modern life. Even if the song remains the same, the Bottle Rockets tell stories you want to hear again. **GREG MILNER**