

BLUE NOTE

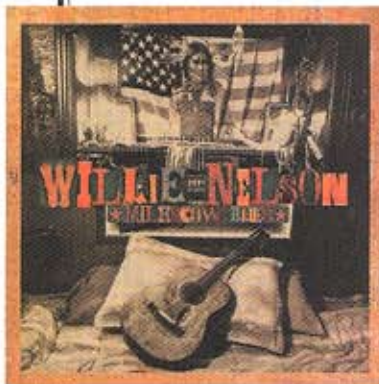
Willie is still Willie.

by Andy Langer

Willie Nelson *Milk Cow Blues*

ISLAND

HYPING MILK COW BLUES AS Willie Nelson's first official



blues album is smart marketing, but these days Nelson simply makes Willie Nelson records—his legend and aesthetic transcend genre and concept. *Milk Cow Blues* is interesting not because it's blues-oriented but because it so often can't help but sound like pure Willie. Which is no accident, for his singing and songwriting have always employed blues phrasings. Case in point: the straightforward manner in which he approaches the umpteenth recycling of "Crazy," "Funny How Time Slips Away," and "Night Life." They're mostly delivered paint-by-number, except for the Dream Team magic B.B. King brings to "Night Life." And, yes, *Milk Cow Blues* is also yet another duet record, with two tracks apiece from Francine Reed, Dr. John, Jonny Lang, Susan Tedeschi, and King. Though it's tough to say whether youngsters like Lang and Tedeschi were invited to drive sales, song selection ultimately proves more important than who else is singing 'em. Alongside blues standards like

"Kansas City" and "The Thrill Is Gone," a pair of long-forgotten Nelson tunes, "Wake Me When It's Over" and "Rainy Day Blues," stand strong. In fact, forget the guests altogether. A gorgeous solo reading of Bob Wills' "Sittin' on Top of the World" that should forever bridge the gap between western swing and blues winds up being the album's most spine-tingling moment. Nelson too often relegates himself to rhythm guitar parts for this CD to earn him the guitar-hero status he deserves, but *Milk Cow Blues* is still a showcase for singin' Willie. At 67, rarely has he sounded more authentic or compelling. How naturally the voice meets the material offers yet another graceful step forward, making *Milk Cow Blues* as eminently listenable as a plain ol' Willie record should be. In a perfect world, that alone would have warranted the hype.

The Gourds

Bolsa de Agua

SUGAR HILL



SINCE ART IS BY NATURE A solo endeavor, it's the rare musical collaboration that doesn't end in compromise. Yet *Bolsa de Agua*, the fifth and best album in the Gourds' catalog, captures the Austin group locked in on practically every level. Half a decade has made survivors of the new kids on the block, yet they remain an oddball combination: deepwoods rootsy with an alternative art bent, led by hearty musical prowess and two

songwriters who could not be more stylistically dissimilar. Kevin Russell is the meat-and-potatoes foot-stomping foundation of the group, whose best efforts resonate like charismatic old friends. The flipside is Jimmy Smith, whose work stubbornly refuses to yield to expectations. Like someone who asks, "You know what I think?" and then doesn't tell you, his songs can frustrate until they creep into your consciousness and stay there. The newest Gourd, Uncle Tupelo-Wilco veteran Max Johnston, contributes two surprisingly earthy rock ballads that fit perfectly in the repertoire. These new recordings transcend the slapdash feel of the band's earlier releases. And though any one of these songwriters could have made a fine album, together they've created what is surely one of the year's best. JEFF MCCORD

EDITED BY BRIAN D. SWEANY

HOT BOX

Barbara Lynn

Hot Night Tonight

ANTONE'S

THE 1962 SOUL-POP HIT "You'll Lose a Good Thing" and appearances on *American Bandstand* put Beaumont's Barbara Lynn on the map as the world's greatest (though perhaps only) left-handed fe-



male blues guitarist. That reputation has carried her ever since, despite just three new albums recorded over the past fifteen years—a scarcity that makes *Hot Night Tonight* all the more a joy to hear. More than half of the twelve tracks have "man" or "love" in the title (one notable exception is "Don't Hit Me No More"), which should tip you off to the brand of R&B that Lynn lays down, owing more than a few